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THE CRESSET

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Contributors

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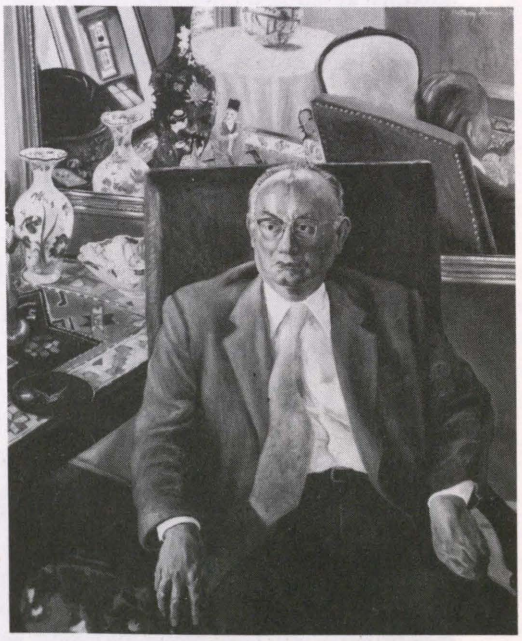

Anthony J. Droege, American b. 1943, *Roman,* 1978, oil on canvas, 50" x 42".

Cover: Anthony J. Droege, *Kristina,* 1977, o/c. 61" x 48".

An exhibition of paintings and sculpture by South Bend, IN artist, Anthony Droege, has been scheduled for Valparaiso University's Moellering Library Gallery Sept. 15-Oct. 12.

RHWB

IN LUCE TUA

Comment on Contemporary Affairs by the Editor

The Democratic Auction

Attentive readers of these columns may recall our last venture (it occurred in December, 1982) into political prognostication. In a fit of recklessness, we predicted that Senator Ted Kennedy would win the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1984. Almost immediately the Senator—acting, no doubt, out of pure spite—took himself out of the Presidential race.

By now the Democratic Presidential contest is in full flight, and Messrs. Askew, Cranston, Glenn, Hart, Hollings, and Mondale are contending earnestly for the prize that Kennedy decided, at least this time around, to pass up. Readers looking for additional feckless adventures in political handicapping will have to satisfy themselves elsewhere. No more predictive foolishness here: *In Luce Tua* will in future confine itself to the high ground of after-the-fact analysis. But the Democratic Presidential race commands—or ought to command—our attention for reasons other than curiosity as to the likely winner. There are few better ways to learn about our political culture than by observing how people go about attempting to win its highest honor.

At times the prevailing assumption seems to be that the Presidency will go to the candidate who manages to make the largest number of promises to the widest variety of special interests. We witness the spectacle of the Democratic Six making the rounds of their constituent interest groups, each of the candidates attempting to outbid his fellows in assuring the various groups in turn—blacks, feminists, gays, educationists, trade unionists, whatever—that he can best be trusted to deliver to them from government that which they most ardently desire. The process has not gone unnoticed or uncriticized. The inevitable question arises: where in all this lies the public interest? Is politics nothing more than the aggregation of separate special advantages?

The answer to that question is not as simple as might at first appear. The myth of the public interest—of an objective, knowable common good that lies above and beyond any particular set of interests—does not bear up well under close scrutiny. James Madison and the other founders of our nation made no apologies for constructing a system of government based, in considerable part, on the weighing and balancing of competing interests. The modern social-service state maintains much of its legitimacy by being, and offering, if not all things to all people, than as many things to as many people as seems prudent.

In a pluralistic society like ours, the pursuit by the society's myriad constituent parts of their varied self-interests is inevitable and legitimate. We need not, if we are gay Lithuanian hodcarriers, feel guilty about seeing to it that gay Lithuanian hodcarriers get their proportionate share of public benefits. That's the way our system of pluralist democracy works, and given the scarcity of philosopher-kings who might dispense social justice with benign and Solomonic impartiality, it is difficult to construct, even in imagination, a better system to take its place.

In reality, the rhetoric of the public interest is most often employed by individual groups to make their pursuit of particular interests seem other and nobler than it is. We all have a tendency to identify personal and group goods with the wider public good. Historians have no difficulty piling up examples of such self-deception from the past, and most of us suspect that we can specify countless contemporary instances as well—ourselves, of course, always excepted.

Achievement of the common good consists not in devising a system that somehow transcends all particular goods. It consists rather in selecting the best possible mix of particular goods. And even that optimum mix will favor some interests over others. Thus, for example, we want to put together that combination of economic policies that will provide the broadest possible range of economic and social benefits for the nation at the lowest long-run cost to particular groups, especially those that can least afford economic penalties. But no conceivable set of policies will affect all groups equally. We can only hope for a calculating mechanism that will produce, in sum, the highest aggregate good.

Thus we should not criticize the contenders for the Democratic Presidential nomination simply because they promise various things to various groups. Those promises become blameworthy only when they are made so indiscriminately or so unwisely that their implementation would do net damage to the society. If there is truly a higher general good to be kept in mind beyond the skillful balancing of particular goods, it is the good of common restraint. We should all have learned from the disastrous inflation of the Seventies the damage done to everyone in society when groups demand too much and politicians say no too seldom.

Our public ethics need not be supererogatory; they need only be prudential. A defensible public morality does not require the self-sacrifice and self-renunciation that Christians impose on themselves in their private and personal lives. Groups are not morally answerable to the same standards as individuals. But collective restraint is one discipline by which we all further all our interests.

Speaking for the Church to the World

Reflections on a Theme by Paul Ramsey

Richard John Neuhaus

In recent months, ecumenical agencies such as the World Council (WCC) and National Council (NCC) of Churches have been subjected to what is described as an "unprecedented" barrage of public criticism. Institutional defenders have issued expressions of pained surprise: Why didn't the critics talk to us privately, through appropriate channels, instead of co-operating with the mass media in making their charges? In truth, many of us who have for years worked within the circles of ecumenical social ethics have raised objections with little perceptible effect. We have been a minority within those circles but an even smaller minority within the community of theologians concerned for the church's social responsibility. Except for a handful of approved consultants involved in the perpetual conferences of Geneva and New York, people in the field have long since given up on the WCC and NCC as sponsors of serious intellectual exchange. This is a great sadness. As I will argue, the WCC in particular is, by its constituting vision and continuing potential, an instrument of importance in shaping Christian witness to our time.

The controversies of the last year and more will turn out to be, I pray, prelude to a renewing reappraisal of ecumenical Christian ethics. For that to happen, however, we need to understand how the ecumenical consensus that was carried by the civil rights movement of the late Fifties and early Sixties was broken, leading to the present state of disarray. There is no ethicist in the American church who can help us here more than Paul Ramsey of Princeton. In *Who Speaks for the Church?* (Abingdon 1967) he dissected the elements of the crisis by which we are still entangled. Reacquainting ourselves with his argument may move us toward a clearer understanding of the distinctive role of the church in the public arena.

A personal word may be in order. I first came to know Paul Ramsey around the time he published the book in question. Under the auspices of the Council on Religion and International Affairs, we took opposing sides in the debate over U.S. policy in Indochina. As a founder of Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, I was suspect in the anti-war movement because of my insistence that, while disagreeing with Ramsey on the particulars of policy, we must heed his cautions against surrounding our prudential judgments with the rhetoric of "thus saith the Lord."

Getting Beyond the Vietnam Debate

While my participation in the anti-war movement was haunted and tempered by the voice of Paul Ramsey, the questions he raised then go far beyond the debate over Vietnam. We could have another and no doubt useful conference on the diverse arguments made by Christians during the tortured years of that war. But this conference, I take it, intends to deal with less dated questions, addressing the perduring principles by which the church should shape its political witness and action. Perhaps only now, to the extent that we are extricated from the debate over Vietnam (and admittedly that extrication is not yet completed), can the full measure of Paul Ramsey's contribution be taken.

Ramsey wrote his "little essay" in response to his experience at the World Council of Church's 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society. There, within a few days, more than three hundred people listened to addresses and broke up into sections and subsections to write reports that, taken together, came up with answers to a hundred and more issues of global import. Ramsey was appalled by the procedure and even more appalled by the principles, or lack thereof, that informed the procedure. He saw the event not merely as the miscarriage of one conference but as an indication of a syndrome that was rapidly undermining the integrity and credibility of the ecumenical move-

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The church is not fulfilling its task if it is content either with the moral truisms appropriate to Mount Olympus or with the mobilization of influence appropriate to club house politics.

ment. The conference was orchestrated, he wrote, by the "social action curia" and reflected a "Church and Society syndrome." (He insisted that he did not use the term "curia" pejoratively, but it must be observed that nobody has used that term favorably for a long time.) By "syndrome," he wrote, "I mean the passion for numerous particular pronouncements on policy questions to the consequent neglect of basic decision- and action-oriented principles of ethical and political analysis."

Ramsey saw then the contradictions that still obtain in such ecumenical meetings: they style themselves as the voice of the church speaking to the world, especially to political decision-makers, and at the same time want to be seen as a prophetic voice speaking to the churches. They simultaneously presume to speak for the church while trying to persuade the church to their viewpoint. In Troeltsch's well-known terms, they want at the same time to be both church and sect. In the tradition of the great cultural churches, they would speak truth to the power of which they are part. In the great sectarian tradition, they would speak a word of divine judgment against principalities and powers from which they have come out and separated themselves. You cannot, insisted Ramsey, have it both ways.

But this contradiction was not the chief concern exercising Paul Ramsey. In whatever mode the ecumenical movement speaks—whether as church or sect, whether as church to the world or as prophetic voice to the churches—the main problem, he thought, is that it is speaking to the wrong purpose. It is speaking primarily to influence public policy specifics rather than as a teacher determined to elevate the thought and discourse by which such policies are formed. "Radical steps need to be taken in ecumenical ethics if ever we are to correct the pretense that we are makers of political policy and get on with our proper task of nourishing, judging, and repairing the moral and political *ethos* of our time."

Although Ramsey did not put it this way, his argument is sympathetic to the proposition that politics is in large part a function of culture, and at the heart of culture is religion and the ethical reasoning that is grounded in religious belief. When Christian leaders believe that policy formation is "the big time," and the formation of culture is therefore a lesser task, it says more about their religion (and their sociological understanding, or lack thereof) than about their politics. It is not a step upwards toward relevance but a step downwards toward trivialization when churches are more concerned about the pros and cons of the MX missile than about underscoring the ontological dignity of the human person. Those who think that the ontological dignity of the human person can be taken for granted, and that it is more important to "do something" about the MX missile, have little understanding of the cultural corrosion that has produced this era of moral decadence.

Quite apart from which tasks are more important, however, Ramsey contends that the church is called to do well the *distinctive* task that is the church's, qua church. "Our quest should be to find out whether there is anything especially Christian and especially important that churchmen *as such* may have to say in the public forum concerning the direction of public policy—not directives for it." Acknowledging that the line between "directions" and "directives" is not always clear, he urges that we should at least be clear about our distinctive intention. Our intention is not so much to tell policy-makers what they should do as to enlighten them as to what they must take into account in deciding what to do.

Defending Pious Generalities

Ramsey is aware that this may sound like an argument for the church's speaking pious generalities and avoiding the controversies of policy specifics. If his argument is taken seriously, however, it becomes clear that "pious generality" is a dismissive phrase only because the pious have not thought very carefully about their generalities. Ramsey wants to insist upon the admittedly difficult distinction between enprincipled reflection and policy specifics. The church is not fulfilling its task if it is content either with the moral truisms appropriate to Mount Olympus or with the mobilization of influence appropriate to club house politics. The distinctive task of the church is to be found in the shifting ground between the pseudo-transcendence of aloofness and the myopic immanence of political partisanship.

"Must those who undertake to speak for the church, or in the name of Christian truth, choose between abstract irrelevancies and policy-making exercises?" he asks. His answer is clearly negative. In an especially insightful section on "the abstractness of concrete advice," Ramsey notes that what are offered as policy-making exercises often result in vacuous generalizations. In a particular circumstance the church may think it is being very specific and practical in calling upon warring parties, for example, to declare a cease fire and negotiate their differences. If in that particular circumstance, however, one party to the conflict has tried just that and the other party has demonstrated its determination to intensify the fighting, then the advice is utterly without practical import. It sounds very specific and policy-oriented, but in fact translates into nothing more than the bland abstraction, "Let there be no war."

As he wrote about "the abstractness of concrete ad-

The church needs a self-denying ordinance in addressing urgent political problems of the day: no more should be said than can clearly be said on the basis of Christian truth and insight.

vice," Ramsey might also have written a section on "the concreteness of abstract advice." That is, in the rhetoric of specific conflicts, the most abstract generalities translate into the most concrete policy recommendations. During the Vietnam years, "No more war!" was translated to mean U.S. withdrawal from Indochina. "America should be on the side of the poor and oppressed" is today translated to mean no more aid to El Salvador. "Taking risks for peace" frequently means risking war by unilateral disarmament. In short, the choice is not between the abstract and the concrete, for our abstractions become concrete advice and, as Ramsey illustrates, our concrete advice becomes an abstraction.

In the spirit of Ramsey, I would suggest that an alternative begins with an understanding of the connection between the transcendent and the immanent. We must work within and accept responsibility for a specific historical moment which is—as are all historical moments short of the Kingdom of God—deeply unsatisfactory. There has been much talk in recent years about doing ethics "contextually." But the context that is this historical moment has itself a context—a context of time-transcending, even eternal, truth and promise. Without the "context of the context," there is no transcendence. Then the World Council of Churches was right to adopt the slogan, "The world sets the agenda for the church." For then there is no other agenda, there is no other game in town. Then there is nothing else to be "relevant to" than the specific policy decisions and power wieldings of this historical moment. This "loss of transcendence" is the core problem underscored by the Hartford Appeal for Theological Affirmation issued by an independent ecumenical meeting in 1975.

The drafters of the Hartford Appeal put together a group of essays in *Against the World for the World,* and it should be read alongside Ramsey's *Who Speaks for the Church?* Such a comparison reveals many similarities, but it also points up a significant difference. Ramsey's argument would have been stronger, I believe, had he attended in this book to the theological debilitation that results in the miscarriage of social ethics. For example, he rightly excoriates religious leadership for prescribing political policy-decisions when they themselves do not accept responsibility for the consequences of such decisions. It is a form of cheap prophecy. "Political rulership" he writes, "makes life-giving, or at least actuality-giving, deeds out of words." "The religious communities have a less awe-full responsibility," he suggests. But I would urge that Christians, who understand the awe-fullness, the ultimacy, of the Word, should not accept this distinction between words and actuality. My suspicion is that Paul Ramsey would agree with me on this. His unfortunate choice of language in *Who Speaks for the Church?,* however, may have given aid and comfort to the opponents of transcendence.

Ramsey repeatedly calls upon Christians who are dealing with public policy to impose upon themselves "a self-denying ordinance." By a self-denying ordinance he means that "no more be said in addressing the urgent political problems of the present day than can clearly be said on the basis of Christian truth and insights." The call for a self-denying ordinance is exceedingly important, but it will not be heeded if it is perceived as a call for the church to do less rather than more. It is tempting at this point to invoke the axiom that "less is more." But the church's speaking less specifically, or less promiscuously, or with less certitude to policy questions does not necessarily mean that the church will be speaking more of that truth which is distinctively appropriate to the church. Without a vigorous reappropriation of that most appropriate truth, the call of Ramsey and others to speak with self-denying carefulness will be seen as a diminution of the church's role in the modern world.

The Church's Truth Is the Gospel Story

I take that most appropriate and imperative truth of the church to be, quite simply and complexly, the gospel. It is the assertion of the story—centered in the life, death, resurrection, and promised return of the Christ—by which all of reality is to be rightly understood and, one day, rightly ordered. This gospel challenges the notion that the most "awe-full" responsibility is exercised by those who wield and influence political power. Indeed this gospel defies the imperiousness of the political in our time. It denies the illusion that the most important events of our time appear in the pages of the *New York Times* or that the evening news can begin to convey, as Walter Cronkite used to say, "the way it is" any day of the week.

Those who believe that God worked his eternal purposes through an obstreperous tribe of Semites and revealed himself most fully in a derelict preacher crucified one Friday afternoon outside Jerusalem two thousand years ago can and must take seriously, but can and must not take too seriously, what the *New York Times* declares to be the world-shaping and world-shaking events of our day. Those who believe that in baptism they have already died with Christ, and that "doing this in remembrance of him" engages the cosmos in the triumph of its Lord—those who believe that cannot be intimidated by the threats nor seduced by the promises of politics. God works along the fault-lines of history, in the shadowed interstices of the conflict between good and evil. It is more than possible that in the sight of God, which is to say, in truth, there is no more important thing happening this day than is happening to an

Among the "social action curia" at the National Council of Churches, Christian fellowship is often determined more by one's attitude toward Ronald Reagan than by one's faith in Jesus Christ.

adolescent in Tanzania who is choosing the good, or to a prisoner in the Soviet *gulag* who knows a liberation beyond his captors' imagining or control, or in a nurse's act of love toward a dying woman in the cancer ward of some hospital.

What I am saying is that the crisis in Christian social ethics today is, far more than anything else, a crisis of faith. We must indeed find better, more careful, more credible ways to articulate religiously-grounded truth in the political realm, but our most important contribution as believers is to relativize the realm of the political. Our engagement in the provisional politics of the present must be informed by our commitment to the radically "new politics" of the promised Kingdom. A "self-denying ordinance" can only be accepted by a church that knows that the politics of the present is not the only game or the most important game in town. Today's dispute over the church's role in politics is, in large part, a quarrel over portions of the mess of pottage for which the church has sold its birthright. Liberals, conservatives, and those who travel under other banners are scrambling to capture for their purposes a larger part of the residual resources of a faith that was brought into being by transcendent hope.

You may suspect that I have wandered rather tendentiously, even homiletically, from our subject. But I do believe that a reconstruction of Christian social ethics depends upon a reconstruction of Christian faith. We are rightly concerned for the integrity of the political community, but if we, as church, are to make any contribution to the political community we must be first concerned for the integrity of the community of faith. And that means that we must be concerned for the truth by which that community lives. It is in this shared conviction that I so powerfully sympathize with the work of Stanley Hauerwas, a student of Paul Ramsey's and, I believe, one of the most seminal thinkers in Christian ethics today. Hauerwas has, in my view, leaned too far toward the "sect" side of the church/sect distinction and has thus too easily resolved some of the problems in which I find myself embroiled. But he is surely right in saying that the church must be emphatically and distinctively the church, or else it is not really very interesting who presumes to speak for it.

Buried in a footnote of the book under examination, Paul Ramsey admits: "I am suggesting, in effect, that ecumenical ethics needs to return to Oxford and begin again." He is speaking, of course, of the ecumenical movement's Oxford Conference on the Life and Work of the Church of 1937. There Christian leaders deliberated under the threatening shadow of the Third Reich. The "German Christians," those who hailed Hitler, believed that the world sets the agenda for the church. No transcendent judgment was to be allowed. Theirs was a God entirely immanent in history, and there, at the crest of the divine insurgency in time, was Der Fuehrer. Against this idolatry, Oxford declared, "Let the church be the church!" It is a declaration desperately needed today.

Playing According to Secular Rules

The alternative to this renewal of faith, this theological reconstruction, is a continued and pitiable division of Christians along political lines. When we stop believing the faith, we start figuring out how to use it. When we stop saying our prayers, we are reduced to sniffing around for other powers to change the world. Or, if we do say prayers, they are mainly against our political opponents. When we stop believing in the "magic" of Word and Sacraments, we succumb to believing in the magic of political transformations. When we have no longer the courage to challenge secularism, we learn to play by secularism's rules. One such rule is that all of politics be reduced to material, mainly economic, forces. Another is the maintenance of the naked public square, a public arena sterilized of references to the transcendent. And so we check our embarrassingly specific Christian beliefs in the cloak room before entering the public arena. When by our religious selves, in our solemn assemblies, we may append a Bible passage or two to our pronouncements, but when those pronouncements are submitted in the public arena they carry no suspicious taint of their religious origins. They have been sanitized. With respect to what they *really* say, the magistrate in the public arena would not know whether they come from the United Methodist Church or from the John F. Kennedy Democratic Club, from the Thomas Road Baptist Church or from the Heritage Foundation.

Paul Ramsey would remind us that a Christian statement on public affairs is not significantly Christian just because it is made by Christians. There is, in sociological jargon, an elective affinity between Christians who address public affairs. As often as not, the affinity is based more on one's politics than on one's Christianity. In truth, one's Christianity comes to be defined by one's politics. Among the "social action curia" of 475 Riverside Drive, headquarters of the National Council of Churches, actual Christian fellowship is often determined more by one's attitude toward Ronald Reagan than by one's faith in Jesus Christ. Similarly, among other Christian activists, it is more important that a person be solid on the pro-family agenda than that he not be sleeping around. And we have arrived at the sorry state where innumerable Americans choose their church by their choice of politics. This makes a mockery of the

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notion that the church should inform the political decision-making of its members. It also makes ludicrous the notion that the church has anything of significance to say to the public order. To that notion, the obvious response is, "which church?" The secularist custodians of the naked public square take great and justified comfort: the threat of the church's witness has been replaced by the impotent, if irritating, cacophany of religious caucuses trying to out-shout one another. The resulting noise is called pluralism.

Perils of "Resolutionary Christianity"

In 1967 Paul Ramsey saw what might happen, what now is happening. He saw that, without radical changes, "the result will be that there will be more and more specific recommendations and less and less of Christian substance informing our ecumenical councils and remaining in our culture." The prevailing pattern of "resolutionary Christianity" results in a promiscuity of pronouncement by which we fault the consciences of others while easing our own consciences. This is more pathetic than prophetic. The language notwithstanding, there is little about it that is radical. It is a self-serving syndrome, reinforcing illusions of self-importance. It is a bid to play with the big boys in "the real world" of political power, and, if they will not let us play with them, we will stand on the sidelines and jeer, and call ourselves prophets. The "social action curia," as Ramsey calls it, has little to say about discipleship, to which all Christians are called, but much to say about prophecy.

Prophecy is a notoriously special vocation to which God calls very few. The Bible is very hard on false prophets. The only prophet to be trusted is the reluctant prophet. The true prophets were pursued by Yahweh until finally, worn down by the chase, they accepted the task to which he appointed them. Today what is called prophecy has been routinized into a career pattern of ecclesiastical advancement. We even have committees and commissions for prophetic utterance, "inclusively" appointed by quota systems. They operate by the self-righteous assurance that, if what they say and do is controversial, it is not because they may be wrong but only because they are being prophetic. While using radical language, they respond to criticism by resorting to the most conservative of justifications, namely, they are authorized to speak by the religious establishment, whereas their critics are "self-appointed mavericks." The church's social witness would be greatly enhanced were we to impose a ten-year moratorium on the use of the word "prophetic" in connection with institutional words and deeds. The meaning of prophecy is debased by tenured prophets and prophecy-by-committee. Indeed, if the Bible is right about prophecy as a sacred vocation, present practice is more than debasing, it is blasphemous.

Blasphemous is a strong word, but it is required, I am afraid. Paul Ramsey used another strong word to describe the situation in 1967, and I expect he would still use it today. That word is heresy. "The identification of Christian social ethics with specific partisan proposals that clearly are not the only ones that may be characterized as Christian and as morally acceptable comes close to the original and New Testament meaning of *heresy*," he wrote. "This, at least, was Paul's meaning when he condemned the factions (*hairesis*)" among the Christians in Corinth and in Rome. In recent times, the religious New Right has been much and justly criticized for suggesting that there is only one Christian position on a multitude of political issues. Ramsey noted then what is much more dramatically evident now, namely, the ways in which the religious left and right mirror one another in both substance and style. If it did not violate my proposed moratorium on the term, I would say that Ramsey's observations in this connection were prophetic. He understood that the victim of conventional practice is not only the integrity of Christian

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social ethics but also Christian ecumenism.

The damage to ecumenism results from the illusion that it takes courage to address policy specifics, whereas the working out of enprincipled directions is in the realm of safe generality. In fact, however, in the national and international church councils there is no price attached to railing against Reagan or condemning the oppressive and imperialist power of U.S.-based capitalism. To the contrary, in these exotic ecclesiastical circles it takes courage to challenge that established orthodoxy. North American and Western European participants say they are only being responsive to the voice of the Third World. But Ramsey saw then what is even more evident now, namely, that the established orthodoxy is overwhelmingly the creation of American and Western European actors and reflects much more the global dichotomy between East and West than between North and South. Indeed what are called Third World concerns are largely crafted by First World functionaries, as they also certify who is and who is not an "authentic voice" of those concerns. Again, it is an instance of elective affinity, which is the opposite of ecumenism. Giving up on the more difficult task of elevating moral discourse in public debate, church leaders settle into the partisanships of their choosing, and thus the ecumenical movement becomes ever more sectarian and divisive.

Partisan and Sectarian Asymmetry

While one wants to be balanced and even-handed, it is not adequate to note that there are religious actors who are equally partisan and sectarian on the other end of the political spectrum. The symmetry does not hold. And that for the simple reason that those who claim to be ecumenical Christians have the primary obligation to be ecumenical. Jerry Falwell, Ed McAteer, and other New Right leaders may not recognize us as brothers in Christ, but we acknowledge them as such, and with that acknowledgment comes a very heavy ecumenical responsibility. In 1967 Ramsey noted the excitement about Christian-Marxist dialogue in Europe. Agreeing with Kenneth Boulding who was also at the Geneva meeting, Ramsey observed, "The parallel to this for us [Americans] would be if steps were taken to open dialogue between the liberal church opinion represented in the NCC and the conservative evangelicals—the right wing." Then and now, the putatively ecumenical Christians claimed that the evangelicals and others had "dropped out of the dialogue." In truth they were never included. The history of the NCC is one of attempted consolidation of liberal, mainline Protestant hegemony in American life. To this extent it was and is anti-ecumenical in originating impulse and continuing practice.

Fifteen years later, the insurgency of evangelical and fundamentalist religion in the public arena has made Ramsey's plea yet more urgent. In addition, the subsequent move from Christian-Marxist dialogue to Marxist Christianity and Christian Marxism, under the banner of sundry liberation theologies, has made a positive response to that plea yet more difficult. Ramsey saw then two alternative models that, if heeded, could restore ecumenism to the ecumenical movement. The first model was the Faith and Order work of the World Council of Churches. He pleaded that the social action sectors of the WCC should emulate the theological and intellectual seriousness of Faith and Order. The plea is still in order today. Many of us continue to be committed to the WCC because of Faith and Order which—as, for example, in its recent production of "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry"—continues to keep alive the originating and unifying vision of the ecumenical movement. Sad to say, under the WCC's present leadership the role of Faith and Order has been diminished sharply, while resources and attention have gravitated toward the organs of divisive political partisanship.

The second model in which Ramsey saw reason for hope was the Roman Catholic Church, and most particularly the process and product of Vatican Council II. The council, he said, provided a model of genuine deliberation, in contrast to the predictable and promiscuous production of positions which mark the activities of the WCC and NCC. In addition, the Vatican Council exercised a self-denying ordinance that respected the difference between moral directions and policy directives. Today there is worry about whether Roman Catholic leadership in America is not imitating the pattern that has brought liberal Protestant social action into disrepute.

The worry is not without foundation, yet I believe that the process of consultation and deliberation surrounding the recent pastoral letter on nuclear arms, for example, is still far superior to that which produces most liberal Protestant statements. While the bishops might in the long run succumb to the overweening influence of a budding bureaucracy of presumed experts, they today still have an understanding of their teaching (magisterial) authority that is lacking in Protestantism. More than that, God has raised up in John Paul II a man who has a powerful and exquisitely nuanced understanding of the church's distinctive role in political change. For these reasons I believe that Ramsey's hope is still justified today, the hope that the Roman Catholic model can recall to ecumenism the Protestant churches that call themselves ecumenical.

As a result of the controversies of the past year or so,

there are a few promising signs of self-examination in these churches. Not yet, unfortunately, among the leaders of the councils and their dominant member churches, but in publications such as *Christian Century, Christianity and Crisis,* and the *United Methodist Reporter.* The self-examination to date is largely limited to structural questions, but that may be a start. As Ramsey also noted, the churches are practiced in issuing facile calls for governments and socio-economic systems to restructure themselves radically but have shown little inclination or ability to criticize their own structures.

For the NCC, it may be too late. Martin Marty of the University of Chicago is a conscientiously mainline observer who has often implied that the NCC may be a residual bureaucratic shadow of its originating purpose. It began at a time when mainline confidence was high and it was assumed that the resources of the mainline could be channeled readily into causes of social change. Marty notes in a recent interview: "The NCC never caught on to what hit it, and so there is a cultural lag. Their responses today are reflexive and automatic. I almost never look with hope to their documents. . . . Their fundamental problem is that they live as if the spiritual and moral capital and power of the 1950s could be spent forever. They must begin to realize that you have only as much power as the current generation is investing." (*Chicago Tribune,* January 30, 1983)

The Crisis Is a Crisis of Faith

Questions of structure and cultural change are important, but I conclude by returning to the contention that is largely implicit in Ramsey's analysis of 1967: the crisis is a crisis of faith. We can doubtless all agree on the need for a spiritual revival in American and world Christianity, but the idea of spiritual revival may seem somewhat amorphous. I mean more specifically a theological and ethical reconstruction based upon devotion to the radical distinctiveness of the church and its gospel of salvation. I mean the courage to believe that a self-denying ordinance in the political arena is required, not because the church's mission is less than, but because it is ever so much greater than, the partisanships to which some would make that mission captive. I mean the boldness to defy the idols—also the political idols—of secularism.

But effective defiance must be emphatically ecumenical; it must more believably present the community of faith as a source and promise of the unity the world seeks; and therefore it must engage more intensively the largest single communion of believers, the Roman Catholic Church. What then do I mean by spiritual, theological, and ethical renewal? I mean a call from the past which is, now more than ever, the challenge of the present and the promise of the future. I mean the appeal of Oxford in 1937 and the plea of Ramsey in 1967. I mean, "Let the church be the church!"

Jogging

Frosted wood smoke
in all its biting fragrance
awaits my mid-life morning trot
as I round the corner of the park
and head for home and breakfast.
My head, laid easy open
by the rhythm of the feet and breath
is captured by the scent
and wafted back for thirty years
to stand with me
a shivering boy scout
stirring the bubbling, steaming pot
of porridge, hungry, cold,
half blinded in the kitchen smoke
blown by a tricky, early breeze,
and filled, though empty,
with the delicious taste of dawn.

J. Barrie Shepherd

Ben

He sat as always by the front room window
rocking harmless ridges in the carpet,
tracking visions past the gazebo
and arbors, fading like the rooms behind him.

He took his lunch at noon by spoonfuls
underneath the graying kitchen skylight
filling silence with his scraping always
into more of emptiness and echoes.

While elsewhere doors wide-opened and houses
flamed with light, he dialoged with ghosts
whose company he kept in darkness
of laughing boys still rafting on the Thames.

When they found him wandering last night
along the highway and clothed his nakedness
routinely in starched and belted white
he bowed to thank them for their friendliness.

Lois Reiner

A Traveler from Bohemia

The Life and Legacy of Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)

John Steven Paul

I

. . . the theatre and I found each other for better and for worse. I know it's the only thing that saved my life (*from* Memoirs, *1975*).

Thomas Lanier Williams died in his Manhattan hotel room on February 25, 1983. His was a singularly unheroic death, choking on a plastic medicine bottle cap. Labeling the death "accidental," New York City's chief medical examiner suggested that the effects of alcohol or drugs may have impaired the automatic gag response that normally would have ejected the object from the throat.

"Any artist dies two deaths," Tennessee Williams wrote in his *Memoirs,* "not only his own as a physical being but that of his creative power, it dies within him." There is a gulf of more than twenty years between Williams' two deaths. For all but the devotees of his drama and those devotedly hopeful for the American theatre, Tennessee Williams had drifted away on the wreck of his career following the successful production of *Night of the Iguana* in 1961. Between that production and his first success, *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945, this most poetic of American playwrights had written eight major plays for the Broadway stage, plays which were innovative in almost every aspect: character, language, idea, and *mise-en-scene.*

In powerful yet fragile theatre pieces such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose Tattoo* (1950), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), Williams introduced to the American theatre an entire community of angels and apes, of sinners and satyrs, of flagellants and fugitives. His characters spoke a new language of rhapsodies and arias in language that is descended from Byron, D.H. Lawrence, and Hart Crane mixed with the idiom of the American South: at times coarsely vulgar, or silken-winged, or distinctively stilted.

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According to his *Memoirs,* Williams wrote about "little people" whose emotional and spiritual crises elevated them to a level of tragic magnitude. In choosing his characters from dissipated aristocratic families, the vulgar rich or petit bourgeois, from working people, or from no-accounts and the demi-monde, the playwright was no different from his predecessors such as Edward Sheldon, Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, or William Saroyan. But it was the nature of their predicaments and the detail in which the playwright dramatized their torments that was radical. Having watched voyeuristically the flaying of these characters' psyches, audiences who peered into the freshly exposed psychological depths found the experience dizzying—and shocking. It is, perhaps, Williams' observation of people *in extremis* and his talent for reproducing their desperation for the stage that will assure him a place as one of the few great modern American dramatists. If O'Neill was the American Aeschylus seeking to identify a modern God and to understand his relationship to humankind, and Arthur Miller the American Sophocles posing the ethical questions peculiar to life in the post-war United States, then Tennessee Williams is the American counterpart of Euripides, the psychological complexity of whose characters stands in bold, if anti-heroic, relief against the background of an Athens in decline.

Williams' complex and emotionally dynamic characterizations provided the American acting community with a series of *tours-de-force* surpassed in this country only by the drama of O'Neill. A partial list of performers whose careers were launched, boosted, or revived after a Williams performance recalls a generation of American actors: Marlon Brando, Jessica Tandy, Kim Hunter, Eli Wallach, Barbara Bel Geddes, Paul Newman, Geraldine Page, Cliff Robertson, Maureen Stapleton, Patrick O'Neal, and Margaret Leighton. The period of Williams' greatest vitality coincided with the burgeoning of the Actors Studio as the institution which would provide American acting with its unique style. Under the direction first of Elia Kazan and Robert Lewis and later of Lee Strasberg, the Studio members discovered that their Stanislavskian system for the reproduction of psychological truth, a method which stressed emotional identification with the character, was the ideal approach to the profundity of Williams' characterization. The Actors Studio used and developed some of Williams' scripts in its work, trained actors for his stage and film plays, and reflected the glory when its actor-members were sensationally successful in the playwright's best work.

At the center of Tennessee Williams' candid* Memoirs *is a tension between gently self-mocking wisdom born of a life of struggle and remembered anguish become real in the remembering.

Tennessee Williams is perhaps less famous with present-day theatre audiences for his innovations in theatrical form. In a 1945 newspaper article, the playwright declared himself an advocate of art that is anarchistic in impulse, witching in technique, and offbeat in appearance. His efforts to create a new poetry of the theatre resulted in plays that looked different from much of what was currently on stage. Williams conceived productions of such plays as *The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire,* and *Summer and Smoke* in neither strictly naturalistic nor expressionistic terms. The playwright drew freely on all the resources of the theatre, including lighting, recorded music, transparent screens, and projections, to create a language capable of translating his metaphors of human feeling to the stage.

The desire to represent the fluidity of human consciousness on stage led Tennessee Williams beyond the fixity of the realistic, usually interior, setting that dominated the American stage in the Forties. Working with collaborators such as the director Elia Kazan and the scene designer Jo Mielziner, Williams was able to create stage pictures which, in their employment of line, shape, color, light, and shadow, as well as image and symbol, served as effective vehicles for dramatic meaning. Williams did not shun the realistic style; he continued to make use of the visual elements that make up the world of objective reality. But in the shading, the emphasizing, the focusing, and the ordering of the elements in his stage compositions, Williams poeticized reality, as in this partial description of the setting for *The Rose Tattoo:*

> The romantic first lighting is that of late dusk, the sky a delicate blue with an opalescent shimmer more like water than air. Delicate lights appear and disappear like lights reflected in a twilight harbor. . . .
>
> We see an interior that is as colorful as a booth at a carnival. There are many religious articles and pictures of ruby and gilt, the brass cage of a gaudy parrot, a large bowl of goldfish, cut-glass decanters and vases, rose-patterned wallpaper and a rose-colored carpet; everything is exclamatory in its brightness like the projection of a woman's heart passionately in love. There is a small shrine against the wall between the rooms, consisting of a prie-dieu and a little statue of the Madonna in a starry blue robe and gold crown. Before this burns always a vigil light in its ruby glass cup.

Such "notes" for a production are typical of Williams' drama. The stage is meant to be an extension, not exactly of the character Serafina, but of her feelings, of a heart "passionately in love." The setting is a symbol of feeling. The unique power of Tennessee Williams' drama to compel audiences into the world of the play stems from his ability to isolate, focus, and render acute moments in the individual human consciousness such as this and translate them vividly, not only into dialogue and action, but into the totality of the stage production.

II

Of course it is a pity that so much of all creative work is so closely related to the personality of the one who does it.

It is sad and embarrassing and unattractive that those emotions that stir him deeply enough to demand expression, and to charge their expression with some measure of light and power, are nearly all rooted, however changed in their surface, in the particular and sometimes peculiar concerns of the artist himself, that special world, the passions and images of it that each of us weaves about him from birth to death . . . (*from Introduction to* Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, *1955*).

The publication of Tennessee Williams' *Memoirs* in 1975 may have evoked the widest comment of any of his work since *Night of the Iguana.* Written over the course of three years, the book combines the candor of a private journal with the directness of a personal letter. At the center of the work is a tension between gently self-mocking wisdom born of a life of struggle and remembered anguish become real in the remembering. As an historical document, the work is frustrating, largely because of the author's disinclination to compose chronologically. Historical insights are limited to a series of anecdotes—several very amusing—and nearly obscured by the central narrative of a homosexual artist who came bursting out of the closet at age 28 and whose intense sexuality dominated his sensibility for the rest of his life. Although Williams himself said that the *Memoirs* are only "the barest periphery of that which is my intense life," by which he meant his working life, the reminiscences do provide an intriguing guide to Williams' formative experiences. The playwright was continually transforming these experiences into art, drawing the themes of his drama from the drama that was his own life.

Williams spent the first eight years of his life in an Episcopalian rectory in Columbus, Mississippi, where his grandfather was a preacher. During this period, his father, C.C. Williams, spent much of his time on the road as a shoe salesman. The playwright's father emerges from the reminiscences as a good salesman, a man with a golden tongue who inspired both customers and co-workers, and as a rather unconventional, even disrespectable, sort whose impropriety finally got him fired. In his account of these years and his subsequent years in St. Louis, Williams stresses the admiration he had for his reverend grandfather Dakin as well as for his mother, Edwina, and his sister, Rose, whom he deems "victims of excessive propriety."

The most important relationship that developed in these early years was that with his sister. Of that relationship, Williams wrote: ". . . our love was, and is, the deepest in our lives." It had been suggested that their love was incestuous, but Williams responded that it was

If Williams' calling as a poet had detached him from the world in which his family and friends functioned, his discovery and acceptance of his sexual predilections pointed him towards Bohemia.

"quite unsullied by any carnal knowledge. As a matter of fact, we were rather shy of each other, physically. . . ." In the late Thirties, Rose was afflicted with dementia praecox and removed to a sanitarium. She was among the first patients to be treated by means of prefrontal lobotomy, a therapeutic procedure which left her witless but becalmed.

Though life at the rectory had presumably a high moral character, Williams refers to his mother's concern for respectability rather than rectitude. Whatever the facts of her circumstances may have been, Edwina Dakin Williams cherished the gracious Southern codes of behavior, traditions, and conventions. But Edwina's son Tom was not destined to be a conventional Southern citizen. From a boyhood during which he was pathologically shy and often ill, fearful of a father who was often absent, socially dominated by his mother, and devoted to his sister, Williams suffered through an extended adolescence which ended with his entrance into the University of Missouri at age 28 and his acceptance of his homosexuality. If his calling as a poet had detached him from the world in which his family and friends functioned, his discovery of his sexual predilection pointed him toward Bohemia. Indeed, the playwright seems to divide the world into the straights and the gays.

"My place in society," wrote Williams in *Memoirs,* "has been in Bohemia. I love to visit the other side now and then, but on my social passport, Bohemia is indelibly stamped, without regret on my part." After reading the playwright's reminiscences, however, one doubts that he was always able to refer so glibly to his place in society. Much of *Memoirs* is the story of a man reacting, often flagrantly and violently, to the conventions in which he was schooled. Apart from his extended and relatively monogamous relationship with Frank Merlo from 1948 until Merlo's death in 1962, the playwright's non-working existence was comprised of a series of alternately ecstatic and excruciating love affairs of varying duration. His partners included fellow artists, acquaintances, hustlers, and strangers he hustled. The character of these affairs seems, on a first reading, to be uniformly casual, sordid, and grim. "I am sorry so much of this 'thing' [the author's word for *Memoirs*] must be devoted to my amatory activities, but I was late coming out, and when I did it was with one hell of a bang."

A libertine? Perhaps Williams deserved that epithet (and wouldn't be ashamed of it), but just beneath his semi-comic braggadocio one discerns the romantic desperation which accompanied his amours. From his descriptions, one senses that each of these liaisons delivered Williams from the terror of a given moment, and in return for that he delivered himself totally. But as holy as these individual alliances may have been, accumulated they had become a spectre of guilt. In a tribute to Anna Magnani, a woman he greatly admired, the playwright asserted that the fact that the actress was beyond convention was "the root of her proud assurance, as much as it was the root of my own lack of it and the sense of guilt that must always shadow my life." And when Williams was in a hospital in 1969 suffering from the most serious nervous crisis of his life, he had a recurrent dream of walking very slowly down a long corridor toward a lighted room chanting a poem while he walked. A repeated line in the poem is "redemption." "Redemption from what?" the playwright wonders in *Memoirs* ". . . redemption from the 'crime' of my love-life with boys and young men. . . ."

In a "life full of rented rooms," Tennessee Williams was chronically homeless, though he eventually established residences in Key West, Florida, New Orleans, and New York City. His happy days, "that charmed time" at the rectory in Columbus, Mississippi, came to an abrupt end when his father took a job in the home office of the International Shoe Company in St. Louis. The family passed subsequent unhappy days in houses that were always in some way uncomfortable, even alienating to young Tom. Nor was he able to maintain any sense of refuge in personal relationships. The Williams children's beloved nurse was lost to them when they left Mississippi. The girlfriend with whom Tom shared the explorations of adolescence went off to college and married someone else. Later, his lifestyle and his inclinations ruled out prolonged domesticity. "[My] greatest affliction," the playwright wrote in his reminiscences, "which is perhaps the major theme of my writings, [is] the affliction of loneliness that follows me like my shadow, a very ponderous shadow too heavy to drag after me all my days and nights. . . ." He seemed always to be searching for a new home in the kindness of yet another stranger.

While he disdained success and notoriety, he was deeply shaken by lack of approval, especially by the New York critics. It was as if those who rejected his work wrecked the only home he had.

His various diseases in childhood isolated him much of the time, and reminded him that his body was not a fit home for his spirit. In *Memoirs,* Williams remembers his diseases and disorders with the relish of a wounded war veteran: ether shock, diphtheria, hepatitis, cataracts, cardiac ailments, gynecomastia, and a *maecles diverticulum* of the intestine. He was perpetually preparing to die from one of his ailments. His real and ever-present fear of death, of time running out, kept him on the edge of hysteria if not madness, and contributed to a nervous condition more debilitating than any of the other illnesses. Fear of death and of slowly dying drove the playwright to make love and to write. Williams could keep death at bay as long as he could retreat to bed with someone he desired at night; and as long as he could write, there was reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Finally, the only home the playwright knew was his work as a writer. From a pastime in the lonely years of childhood and an escape from the cruelty of playmates, from a blustering, brutal father, from jobs that he hated and from the society with which he was at odds, Williams' writing grew into his reason for being and an agent of salvation from fear, surpassing even love in its efficacy. Remarkably disciplined, no matter where he was or what activity had occupied the night before, he was at his writing desk by the early morning, fortified ever by a cup of strong black coffee.

It was always the work itself that was salutary, not the favorable reception of it. After an opening night of accolades for *The Glass Menagerie,* Williams "felt embarrassed; I don't think I felt any great sense of triumph. I think writing is continually a pursuit of a very evasive quarry, and you never quite catch it." He blamed a temporary ebbing of his creativity on the material comforts that accompanied *Menagerie*'s success. Yet while he disdained success and notoriety, the playwright was deeply shaken by lack of approval, especially by the New York critics. It was as if those who rejected his work wrecked the only home he had.

The picture of Tennessee Williams that emerges from *Memoirs* is of a man perhaps less sinned against than sinning, at least by conventional standards, and painfully aware of his moral status. The hyper-sensitivity and acute self-consciousness from which his poetry flowered exacerbated the difficult circumstances of his child- and young manhood, and directed his emotional energy inward to self-respect, self-aggrandizement, self-pity, self-hatred. Born into a world to which he could not reconcile himself without lying, he created a personal world of his own, a nether world in which conventional society might see truths about itself reflected.

The price for such artistic anarchy and truth-telling was permanent, often painful, alienation from the mainstream. The balm for such pain was movement: from one poem to another, from one scene to another, from one lover to another. A traveler from Bohemia, Tennessee Williams was both pursued by and in pursuit of truth and desperately fearful of arriving at the terminus. Along the way, this traveler acquired some marvelous and meaningful stories to tell—some historical, some invention—most about places and people that seem to be totally foreign and fantastic, at first. . . .

III

The fact that I want you to observe what I do for your possible pleasure and to give you knowledge of things I may know better than you, because my world is different from yours, as different as any man's is from the world of others, is not enough excuse for a personal lyricism that has not yet mastered its necessary trick of rising above the singular to the plural concern, from personal to general import. But for years and years now, which may have passed like a dream because of this obsession, I have been trying to learn how to perform this trick and make it truthful, and sometimes I feel that I am able to do it . . . (*from "Person-to-Person," Introduction to* Cat on a Hot Tin Roof).

"I don't ask for your pity, but just for your understanding—not even that—no," says Chance Wayne, the beautiful but aging gigolo in *Sweet Bird of Youth.* "Just for the recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all." But who is Chance Wayne that we might see ourselves in him? A once decent young man who, in order to prove his worth to his girlfriend's father, went to New York to become an actor. When he couldn't earn a living as an actor he became a hustler and the decadent downward spiral of that lifestyle ravaged him both body and soul. Chance Wayne seems not only immoral but foreign, even fantastic, to us, as do many of the inhabitants of Tennessee Williams' personal "special world." Chance is a fugitive, a familiar figure in the community of Tennessee Williams' characters, whose pursuers make him universally recognizable.

The fugitive is a traveler with a special sense and a telling look of urgency attached to his progress. The fugitive is, as *The Glass Menagerie*'s Tom Wingfield says of his father, "in love with long distances." But Tom, remembering the story of the little family in St. Louis from the road, knows he left to escape a trap and to save his life. His commitment to long distances is more a matter of survival than love. Other characters have fled for other reasons. Blanche DuBois, of *A Streetcar Named Desire,* is an unwelcome guest in her sister's house in New Orleans, trying to escape torturous memories of a young husband driven to suicide, a way of life lost by profligacy, and a youth consumed in fornication. Like Blanche, both Val Xavier of *Orpheus Descending*

Williams' fugitives are fleeing the inescapable advance of time; that is, the coming of the time when they will be old, weakened, impotent, unattractive, unproductive, unloved, and alone.

and Chance Wayne of *Sweet Bird of Youth* are running from a corrupted past, though they are young men still and hope somehow to have their former purity restored.

Others have no such hope. They travel as if to keep from ossifying or disintegrating. Alexandra del Lago, the vintage movie star of *Sweet Bird of Youth,* is escaping the disaster of her comeback attempt, the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon, the defrocked priest turned tour guide in *Night of the Iguana,* from his "spooks." The largest convention of fugitives appears in the allegorical *Camino Real.* Here in the dusty plaza of some unnamed town south of the border is the end of the royal road of illusion. To this cul-de-sac have come many, including Jacques Cassanova and the Lady of the Camelias, Marguerite Gautier, who have arrived at the inescapable terminus of their journeys. It should be said, however, that the poet Lord Byron and the knight errant Don Quixote de la Mancha depart the plaza in search of further romance. These are not fugitive travelers but heroic, perhaps foolish, seekers after dreams. And from the plaza, the old knight takes with him, not Sancho Panza, but Kilroy, the play's all-American hero.

The fugitives are fleeing the inescapable advance of time; that is, the coming of the time when they will be old, weakened, impotent, unattractive, unproductive, unloved, and alone. Ironically, the "fugitive kind" are young, or at least not so old as to have forgotten the feeling of youthful vigor. The nature of their life's experience has affected them profoundly. In efforts to assuage the pain of failure, loneliness, and loss, which they felt with an acuity that was super-normal, they turned to fleshly vices in magnificent excess. Were age measured by the level of rot, as Chance Wayne admits in *Sweet Bird of Youth,* they would be ancient. Williams emphasizes the tragedy of his fugitives' corruption by recalling the characters' former innocence and revealing the vestiges of it which reside just below the surface of their crusty hearts. Their sense of their own corrupted innocence and wasted youth has given them a vision of their own mortality; they sense acutely the inevitability of their own defeat. In addition to their almost hysterical sense of urgency, the fugitives possess unbridled freedom from convention and a quality the playwright named "the charm of the defeated," which makes them peculiarly attractive.

The fugitives are desperate and decadent, highly conscious and guilt-ridden, mobile and promiscuous, and sexually liberated and satiated. Another kind of Williams' character, the unfulfilled, is less certain of and certainly less willing to reflect upon the incompleteness of her life. The unfulfilled character is caught in the trap from which the fugitive is running; in this case it is a trap which keeps her from celebrating what Williams called in *Memoirs* "the natural emanation of sex."

In *Orpheus Descending,* storekeeper Jabe Torrance's wife, Lady, married her older husband when she was eighteen and heartbroken after the man she loved passionately forsook her. She slept with him only once, and now lives a barren life devoid of sexual contact. Serafina Delle Rose of *The Rose Tattoo,* a woman passionately in love with life and loving, has virtually locked herself away from life in the wake of her husband's untimely death and of rumors that he was unfaithful to her. *The Night of the Iguana*'s Hannah Jelkes has dedicated her life to her poet-grandfather and, but for two oddly inconsequential experiences, has been faithfully celibate. Perhaps Williams' classic characterization of the unfulfilled is Miss Alma Winemiller about whom, Williams wrote in the stage directions to *Summer and Smoke,* "there is something prematurely spinsterish . . . an excessive propriety and self-consciousness is apparent in her nervous laughter . . . her true nature is still hidden even from herself."

Miss Alma's tragedy is that the agent of her fulfillment has been for so long so close at hand. Young Dr. John Buchanan is akin to the fugitive kind, though he has done all his rotting in Glorious Hill, Mississippi. He has admired Alma's decorous beauty since childhood and been quite forward in seeking a physical relationship. She, while subconsciously smoldering, has kept herself from him out of a sense of her position as a clergyman's daughter and a highly developed respect for her spirituality; and partly, it seems, to chasten him for his immoral behavior. After the accidental shooting of John's father, himself a doctor doing important research, the young doctor reforms himself, mends his behavior, and even carries on his father's work. Now Alma begins to discover the extent to which her life is partial. When she returns to John, piteously needful but restrained, he indicates to her that he respects her spirituality too much to have anything but a Platonic relationship with her and, besides, he has found a fresh young girl to marry. Miss Alma, desperately conscious of her desires, goes to the train station to befriend the first lonely man she confronts there.

If the unfulfilled Alma Winemiller's story reverberates with tragic irony, Williams' "love-play to the world," *The Rose Tattoo,* is a romantic comedy. The story of Serafina Delle Rose ends in fulfillment. During a self-mortifying period of mourning for the virile husband whom she worshipped and whose fidelity she doubted, Serafina kept a puritanical check on herself and her wild young daughter. When she finally submits to her own nature and the loving advances of a Sicilian stranger, Serafina knows once again what it means to be made whole. Hannah Jelkes derives a kind of saintly serenity from her celibacy in *The Night of the Iguana*

If, in Tennessee Williams' plays, there are angels of Death there are also angels sent from God; these angels give sanctuary to the fugitive and succor to the desperately unfulfilled.

and, unlike the other women, possesses a wholeness won entirely by giving of herself. She does not covet sexual gratification. Just the opposite is Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* whose frustrated desire for her husband Brick enhances her strength and impels her to battle for what she wants. In *Orpheus Descending,* Lady Torrance's tragedy ends in violent death. She took in Val Xavier, one of the fugitives, under pretense of hiring a clerk for the store, and found in him the consolation, the holistic healing for which she had been so desperate. Her husband Jabe, now slowly dying, envious of her life, and jealous of her life-source Val, murders her before she is able to enjoy her new wholeness.

Death is the enemy of both the fugitive and the unfulfilled. Death stalks several of the plays. Jabe Torrance is the incarnation of Death in *Orpheus Descending.* He thumps on the floor of his sickroom above the store demanding that Lady come and wait on him. At the end of the play she does exactly that. Lady Torrance is not the only Williams character to "wait on" Death. Death made his headquarters at Belle Reve, Blanche tells Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire,* referring to the plantation now lost to debt. "Why the Grim Reaper had put up his tent on our doorstep." In *Camino Real,* skull-visaged streetcleaners wait to dispose of the hapless voyageurs who reach the end of the road. *Suddenly Last Summer* takes place in the aftermath of the corrupt Sebastian Venable's cannibalization by the starving indigent children he had sexually exploited. Death has moved into the Pollitt mansion in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* where Big Daddy is dying of cancer and is expected to be "tight-mouthed" about it, though, as he says, he doesn't have a pig's advantage:

> Ignorance—of mortality—is a comfort. A man don't have that comfort, he's the only living thing that conceives of death, that knows what it is. The others go on without knowing, which is the way that anything living should go, go without knowing, without any knowledge of it, and yet a pig squeals, but a man sometimes, he can keep a tight mouth about it.

In somewhat of a reversal, the death of the ancient poet Jonathan Coffin in *The Night of the Iguana* waits on the completion of his final poem. The old man dictates the piece, goes to pray, and drifts thankfully off into the sleep of death, cheating it of its vaunted horror. "Sometimes I've seen God in old faces," says his granddaughter Hannah. And the old man's face is a vision of a benevolent God and an unusually peaceful end.

If, for Tennessee Williams, there are angels of Death there are also angels sent from God. "I have never doubted the existence of God," the playwright wrote in *Memoirs,* "nor have I ever neglected to kneel in prayer when a situation in which I found myself (and there have been many) seemed critical enough in my opinion to merit the Lord's attention and, I trust, intervention." As he identified the apes, Williams also identified the angels and wove them into the fabric of his plays. Perhaps not immediately recognizable—often they are strangers—these angels give sanctuary to the fugitive and succor to the desperately unfulfilled; often they open a warm, unquestioning embrace for the lonely. In some instances, the fugitive and the unfulfilled are angels on a mission to one another, but the sanctuary and succor are brief and fleeting in an evil world. In other instances, the supplicant is unable to see the angel that has been sent to his aid. That is Williams' tragic theme.

In more than a score of full-length plays, Tennessee Williams gave words to that cry of the human heart which he called the outcry. The opposite of the primal scream, the outcry is the faint, panicky pleading to no one that comes when the end, real or not, is clearly in sight. The outcry does not inspire admiration, for it is not an expression of courage or bravery. The outcry is a confession, an owning up to the label of "human," with all the flaws and weaknesses thereunto appertaining. As such, the outcry might, not inspire, but induce empathy. Empathy is a bridge by which others may cross over into the special world of the playwright. Tennessee Williams' bridges, while always beautiful, were not always crossable. In the second half of his career, during which he wrote several plays, Williams' special world retreated further and his bridges inspired less and less confidence. Fewer and fewer were willing to cross. Yet, while each of us lives in a special world, we share a common world as well. Of this world, of its brutality, its decadence, its hypocrisy, its sinfulness, but also of its tenderness, its delicacy, its kindness, and its purity, Tennessee Williams spoke with an eloquence unequaled in the American theatre.

Cambodians at the Fish Market

You say "I want a two pound trout, some roe."
They do not know the names of them, shake heads, no,
point to chart. You point, they nod, hold up one finger,
    two.
Point to other chart: (one); (two); (three);
(Head); (scales); (gut); cut, removed efficiently.
They do not understand the words, but know
the process of evisceration. Often see
much disemboweled in their sleep, including
Fish.

Kathleen P. Bufford

God's Two-Handed Rule

Luther on the Christian in the World

David G. Truemper

(The following essays by Professors Truemper and Nuechterlein were originally prepared as working papers for the conference on Luther and the Laity held at Valparaiso University, April 24-27, 1983.)

Though our question is couched in modern terms, it is nonetheless one which we quite properly address to Luther, not least since it was he who in a sense left us with the problem: How does a Christian manage to live responsibly in the fabric of society and not compromise or sacrifice her or his faith in the gospel?

Luther's answer to our question, couched in his own terms, was to speak of God's "two kingdoms," God's "two governments" or "two realms," God's right-handed and left-handed rule. With that formula, Luther managed to sow the seeds for the dissolution of the medieval vision of a Christian society as well as to bequeath to subsequent generations of Lutherans a theological resource that has proved to be as much a problem as a help. It has certainly been controversial. And it has often been misunderstood and misapplied. Like many of Luther's theological insights, it is complex and difficult to appropriate and use in later generations and in subsequent historical situations.

It is the purpose of the present essay to review the essential elements in Luther's notion of two kingdoms, to set that notion into the context of his theology, and to suggest (despite the continuing controversy over its contemporary applicability) something of the contribution this notion can make to Christians in their attempt to live faithfully and responsibly in the complexities of today's world.

As already noted, Luther's notion of a distinction between two kingdoms or governments or realms is a controversial idea. Some critics have drawn a line of connection between Luther's teaching on this subject and the acquiescence of many Germans to Nazi misrule and atrocities. Other, gentler, critics have argued that Luther's view is responsible for the generally quietistic attitudes of Lutherans, for their disproportionately low participation in public life. Still others have suggested that the notion not only is not helpful but is in fact detrimental to responsible Christian participation in the work of solving many of the problems which afflict modern society. They charge that it leads to an abandoning of the world to its own devices and to a false sense on the part of Christians that their real concerns are spiritual and other-worldly.

On the other hand, defenders of the notion of the two kingdoms have praised it as a creative way of relating one's Christian faith to one's secular responsibilities. They tend to see in Luther's idea a genuine impetus to faithful and responsible Christian participation in the life and work of society. And they, in one way or another, find it a helpful (even necessary) tool for keeping clear and straight the gospel by which Christians live. The present writer finds himself quite decidedly in this latter camp.

We can begin to understand Luther's notion of the two kingdoms if we think of it first of all as a way of thinking about secular authority. How shall the Christian account for the power and influence of the state, of government generally? In the middle ages the view had prevailed that there was somehow one Christian society and that, while there were "two swords" (the temporal and the spiritual), both were to be wielded in the service of that common Christian society. Religious sanctions reinforced secular regulations, and the coercive power of the government was at the service of the church and its discipline.

Luther's view emerged against the background of his perception of a serious distortion of governmental power, in which bishops and magistrates exercised each other's authority: "they rule the souls with iron and the bodies with letters." Instead, he argued, there are real boundaries between the realm of faith which demands freedom and the realm of external order and law which rests on coercion. And, perhaps more importantly, he asserted that there is a hidden border or boundary which runs through the middle of each Christian's life; for oneself and one's own person the Christian must follow Jesus' directive and do good and endure injustice, while on the other hand, when the good of one's neighbor or community is at stake, one must resist injustice with all the might and means that are appropriate.

What has been said so far suggests that Luther's two-kingdoms notion is first of all a new (for his time) view

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of secular authority, and secondly, a way of living out the mandates of Jesus Christ. We now take up each of these issues in order.

As Luther saw it, government is necessary, particularly because without it society would disintegrate. Its task is the difficult one of preserving order in a fallen world, of keeping a fallen creation from self-annihilation. In this view, government is a kind of stop-gap measure, a penultimate instrument serving penultimate ends; it simply serves to keep sinners from destroying one another. To be sure, if the world were populated only by true Christians, Luther argued, there would be no need for law and justice and government; one would no more need to prescribe and proscribe their behavior than one would need to instruct an apple tree to bear apples and not thorns. However, such is not the case. So that evil does not win the day, there must be law and enforceable order, also among the baptized who are for the most part Christian only in name.

One consequence of this view is that, since the preserving and ordering of a fallen world is in fact God's good work, Christians may participate with a good conscience in the work of government, and they are to see in that work a genuine service to God. Unlike the anabaptists of his day, Luther did not urge Christians to leave the work of magistrate and judge and hangman—or even soldier—to the unregenerate or unbaptized. And he insisted with equal vigor that Christians not only may but should participate in government, just as they do in other "secular" callings like marriage or agriculture or any craft or trade. Such callings may be secular, but they serve God's good order.

In Luther's view of secular authority there is embodied a fundamental separation of secular and spiritual power, in contrast with the medieval notion of a Christian society. Luther seems to have sensed the inherent contradictions of the medieval secular-spiritual unity, and the historian in him was acutely aware of the centuries of conflicts between church and state, between pope and emperor. Luther's counter-formula gave to each, to the church and to the state, its own reason to be and its own set of responsibilities. And with that he added a sense that the church was not properly regarded simply as an institution in relation to another institution, the state. He did not regard the church so much as a separate and hierarchically-structured legal body as rather the gathering of believers. Thus he tended to shift the focus from the struggle between the powers of church and state to the root question about the relation of the Christian to the world.

For Luther, the Christian's situation in the world was the key matter which his notion of two kingdoms was to illuminate. And with that he offered what is his solution for a root problem in Christian ethics: how does one reconcile the radical demands of Jesus (such as in the Sermon on the Mount) with the realities of life in the world? Instead of restricting either the severity or the scope of those demands (by applying them, for example, only to monks and other spiritual heroes), Luther sought to combine both the demands of Jesus and God's continuing preservation of a fallen world: there are, he argued, two modes of God's governing, two ways in which God does the Godly work in the world. And both ways are in fact *God's* ways. In "the world" God rules through government and the power of the state. In "the church" God rules through the gospel, the word, and the willing self-sacrifice of believers in love and service to one another.

What results is not so much a splitting of reality into two rigidly separated spheres or realms, but rather a way of seeing one and the same reality from two perspectives. The world is still the world, and the Christian is still the Christian, but both are now able to be seen from two distinct viewpoints. The boundary is a hidden one, and it runs through the middle of the life of the Christian, so that there in the conscience the Christian faces the choice between two modes of action or two kinds of decision.

The dividing line is discernible in a number of ways, but one important way is in deciding whether one is acting for oneself or on behalf of others. Shall I resist evil, or shall I suffer evil? Am I acting for myself or for others? To be sure, the more insight one has into a situation, the less clearly that decision is likely to appear. Yet Luther found in that way of deciding a way that enabled one both to preserve the gracious nature of the gospel and to act responsibly in the world. The Christian continually faces the task of determining when one is a "private person" and when one is a "public person." And one does so quite consciously as *one undivided* person, as one who is both righteous and sinner.

Luther's insistence on the unity of the Christian person in the face of the duality of sets of relationships and responsibilities is both the key to avoiding dualistic distortions of the two kingdoms idea and one of the most realistic (in this writer's judgment) of features of his thought. By it one avoids abandoning an evil world to its own—or the devil's—wickedness; one is preserved from dividing the human race into spiritual and secular parts; and one is continually drawn back to the ground of one's life, the gospel, in order to find resources for facing the ambiguities of life in the world.

The ground and basis of the Christian life, Luther never tired of saying in a variety of ways, is the gospel, that message of forgiveness and life and freedom. "The Christian is the perfectly free lord of all, subject to no one," he could say in the first of his famous assertions at the beginning of his essay on Christian freedom. That freedom is based in the confidence that life is God's gracious gift on account of the crucified and risen Jesus. And it is exercised as Christians freely and responsibly act in service to those to and for whom they are responsible. As Luther put it in the second of those assertions: "The Christian is the perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone."

The notion of the distinction between the two king-

doms, the two ways in which God does the Godly work in the world, serves to keep clear the gospel that enlivens Christians and enables their hope. The following series of assertions may serve to indicate what is meant, and why the present writer finds the two kingdoms notion such a promising resource.

1. Since government is God's work of preserving a fallen world, there is no need to hesitate about active participation in its work: to vote, to hold office, to exercise authority, to lobby, to pay taxes, to bear arms.
2. Do not suppose, however, that even wise government or scrupulous obedience can make you ultimately right or can justify your life.
3. Christians do not have special wisdom or insight into the process of governing. The gospel and faith do not enable worldly work in the sense of conferring the power or wisdom or ability to do that work well or wisely.
4. Rather, the gospel and faith enable such worldly work simply by conferring the freedom to exercise worldly responsibility. That is, the gospel about Christ permits responsible work in the world to be just that, and it preserves such work from becoming the ground for one's life before God.
5. The gospel conveys the freedom to do the works of political responsibility and neighborly service in all their sheer limitedness as works, without letting such work bear the additional weight of securing one's life before God.
6. That freedom is a positive impetus for work in the world, for it puts the while realm of worldly responsibility under the sign of the gospel of forgiveness. (a) It enables the Christian, thus freed, to risk becoming implicated in the incriminating and fallen order, with the confidence that the gospel offers the forgiveness of sin; in this way it helps one to avoid paralysis in the face of the world's ambiguities and incriminations. (b) It unhooks the exercise of worldly responsibility from the crushing compulsion of making one's life before God. (c) It makes the work of worldly responsibility less than ultimate, while at the same time, by communicating genuine freedom, it enables the exercise of that worldly responsibility by creating space for it, by letting it be what it is.

A final point needs to be made. Luther understood the Christian to live in the secular kingdom in a twofold sense; as the sinner one has never ceased to be, one is subject to law and restraint and obligation; as the righteous person one has become on account of the gospel, one is charged with using the instruments of the secular order to serve and protect one's neighbor. And both of these aspects of Christian worldly responsibility are balanced by, held in tension with, and indeed enabled by, the gospel for forgiveness and freedom. The tension runs through the middle of the life of the Christian; yet the gospel frees one to live with that tension, really live.

Heinrich Bornkamm concludes his survey of Luther's two-kingdoms notion with these sentences:

> Only if one misunderstands the two kingdom doctrine in a Manichean, dualistic sense can one think oneself free, as a Christian, to leave the world to its own devices—exactly the opposite of what Luther intended. The two kingdom doctrine is not a social-ethical program, neither one to be left behind nor one to be retained. It is the indispensable means of orientation which the Christian must again and again employ when considering his role and action in the world. It makes it possible for him to live according to the command of Jesus in the midst of the orders of this existence, orders marked by signs of the end and yet still preserved by God [*Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 37].

If indeed the two kingdoms notion can provide that orientation and that grounding in the gospel, it may, despite its complexity and its controversy-riddled past, be just the tool we need.

Luther's Thought and Lutherans' Politics

James Nuechterlein

Those who set themselves the task of defending Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms—and I am happy to join David Truemper in that company—might well begin by pondering the fact of that doctrine's vast unpopularity. Even when addressing a predominantly Lutheran audience, proponents of two kingdoms thought cannot assume anything like automatic support for their position. As Professor Truemper indicates, this aspect of Luther's thought remains highly controversial.

At one level, that might surprise us. Two kingdoms thought, after all, arises naturally—one is tempted to say inevitably—from Luther's theology. It is the logical political correlative of the characteristic Lutheran distinction between law and gospel and it fits comfortably with Luther's *simul* perspective on man—the view that the Christian's life is shaped in the dialectical tension of his sinner/saint condition.

Even non-Lutheran Christians need not necessarily find two kingdoms thought uncongenial. While many of them might prefer to alter the precise formulation in various ways, all but the heirs of the most radical wing

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of the reformation would concede, in one way or another, Luther's essential point that the state cannot be run by the gospel and that ethical imperatives vary in public and private realms. The doctrine of the two kingdoms is not vulnerable to the charges of theological inadequacy that other political derivatives of Christian thought, such as the social gospel, leave themselves open to, and if Christians were to do away with the notion, they would quickly find that they had to reinvent something very much like it.

Why then should the two kingdoms doctrine arouse such controversy? Because, simply put, it has, or seems to have, conservative political implications. Critics of the doctrine argue that it leads to an other-worldly unconcern for social injustice and that its tendency to quietism allows Christians who live by it to neglect their duties and opportunities in the world. It is even charged, as Professor Truemper reminds us, with making it possible for countless "good Germans" to persuade themselves that they could in good conscience disregard, even acquiesce in, the monstrous evils committed by the Nazis.

While charges of complicity in Hitler's crimes might be rejected as exaggerated or oversimplified, there remains the suspicion that adherents of two kingdoms thought will never be likely candidates to lead movements of social protest. For those Christians whose piety gives priority to urging collective action against social wrongs, two kingdoms thought has often seemed at best an irrelevance, at worst a hindrance, to the duties their faith calls them to. It is no coincidence that the doctrine came under particular attack during the late 1960s and early 1970s, years in which political activism carried a special urgency for the Christian Left. Any attempt to revivify the notion of the two kingdoms, then, must reckon with the criticisms that its historical record and its apparent inner logic have opened up.

The simplest thing to say in response to the claim that two kingdoms thought conduces to political conservatism is that it's not necessarily so. If we are to place the blame for German conservatism in the 1930s on the doctrine of the two kingdoms, what are we to say of the left-wing political cultures of the Scandinavian nations, countries whose religious traditions were more thoroughly Lutheran than was ever the case in Germany? Those inclined to draw direct lines from Luther to Hitler need to remind themselves of the uncertain relationship between religious faith and political practice as well as of the variables other than religion that enter into political choice. In any case, Lutherans have been—and still are—diverse enough in their political preferences to bring into serious question any reductionist theory of Lutheranism's necessary conservatism.

Considered without prejudice, two kingdoms thought is not essentially quietist. That charge arises from the mistaken assumption that in insisting on the integrity and supremacy of the gospel, Lutherans thereby denigrate all those areas of life that fall within the kingdom of the left hand. Yet to say that something is not of ultimate significance is not at all to deny its penultimate urgency. If Christians must of necessity love God and the gospel of forgiveness in Jesus Christ above all else, that is not to say that by that token they reduce to insignificance all those God-given gifts that provide life its sweetness and savor: family, friends, career, community. There is in fact nothing in Lutheran thought that would lead Christians to suppose that they can love God and yet despise the world in which he has placed us.

There is no way for Christians to ignore or minimize politics. Since politics is important to our lives, it will perforce be important to our lives as Christians. We must, if we take our faith seriously, apply it in a serious way to the things that make a difference to us, and politics, whether we want it to or not, does make a difference. The kingdom of the left hand remains God's kingdom.

A variation on the charge of quietism brought against the two kingdoms notion involves what its critics take to be its unduly negative emphasis. Luther regularly spoke of government in the context of its duty to preserve order in a fallen world, and one can easily get from him an idea of the state as simply a necessary evil, brought into being and finding its justification solely as a device to keep peace among sinful men and women who would, in its absence, tear each other and the social fabric apart. Thus it is a temptation for Lutherans to think of secular rule almost exclusively in terms of coercion, prohibition, and restraint and to fail to appreciate its positive and creative uses.

Luther, of course, is hardly alone in his emphasis on government's role as preserver of social peace. The idea that government exists first of all to preserve order is a commonplace of political philosophy. Yet it may be that Lutherans are excessively inclined to stress this negative, if essential, function of the state and less ready than they should be to take a more expansive and generous view of its purposes. The heirs of Luther have perhaps failed adequately to translate his political prescriptions into the terms appropriate to a modern and democratic political system that the reformer himself had no way of imagining or anticipating.

Here is a case where the antidote to Luther may be found in Luther himself, specifically in his doctrine of vocation. The teaching that it is the Christian's duty and joy to serve God and his neighbor in the place in which God has placed him has obvious implications for the role of the modern Christian as democratic citizen. The application of the doctrine of vocation to the notion of the two kingdoms can free Lutheran political thought of negative and restrictive connotations and provide all the theological justification that any Christian activist could wish for. In the process, it can also lay to rest the idea that two kingdoms thought leads inexorably to political conservatism.

It is tempting to rest the matter there, secure in the assurance that the doctrine of the two kingdoms has

been shown to be free of ideological taint. But the matter is not quite that simple. While it is true that the doctrine carries no necessary right-wing implications, there do exist in it elements of a certain philosophical conservatism. That argument requires some elaboration.

What gives two kingdoms thought its conservative cast is the essential anti-utopianism it implies. For Luther it is the reality and persistence of sin that necessitates the coercive powers of the state and that makes any idea of governing the kingdom of the left hand by the gospel a naive illusion. Men and women are fallen creatures, rebels against God, and any political enterprise in which they engage will reflect that condition. What modernity is apt to call man's alienation, his separation from God and neighbor, stems for Luther from the power of original sin and is not to be cured, as modernists like to think, by improving man's material well-being or altering his social arrangements. Fundamental healing is available only in the gospel and even so it does not cancel the temporal manifestations of sin or allow for the transformation of the left-hand realm into a peaceable kingdom. Theologies of liberation or of the social gospel that imagine otherwise remain radically at odds with Lutheran assumptions.

None of this means that the Christian's striving to improve the lot of his neighbor, which under modern conditions must include striving in the political realm to better his socioeconomic conditions, becomes less urgent. It does mean, however, that urgency should not edge over into idolatry and that the gospel, an essential spring of the Christian's engagement in social action, must not be supposed to be simply coextensive with that social action. As the slogan of some years back had it, we must beware of immanentizing the Eschaton.

It is worth emphasizing again that the philosophical conservatism here suggested should not be confused with conservative politics. Two kingdoms thought does insist on the supremacy and integrity of the gospel, which means that the Christian, even at the most intense moment of social engagement, will remain in some sense other-minded. But that need not be a prescription for social paralysis and it certainly makes no case for the preservation, much less the sanctification, of the status quo.

The case of Reinhold Niebuhr is instructive. Niebuhr understood the power of sin over man and society as well as any theologian of modern times, and he never supposed that he was engaged in building the city of God on earth. He recognized the terrible demands of power politics and he detested sentimentality of any sort. Yet for much of his life he was a socialist and he remained always a man of the Left. He did not require illusions of innocence or visions of a new Jerusalem to keep his sense of the need for political transformation alive. While he knew that the ambiguities and ironies of politics mean that we often achieve less or other than what we intend, he never stopped acting in what Richard John Neuhaus has called "the courage of uncertainty" toward what Niebuhr himself termed "the relatively better." That, for Niebuhr, was all that politics could offer, and it was enough.

Critics of Niebuhr and of two kingdoms thought point out, quite rightly, that a highly developed sense of ambiguity, irony, and limitation can act to inhibit purposeful political action. We are not all Niebuhrs, and the ironic sensibility, added to all the other elements that conspire against social involvement—indifference, cowardice, self-preoccupation, inertia—can tempt us to a resigned inactivity, which sin we may then compound by regarding it as evidence of superior wisdom. But there is no way around that temptation. The perils and frustrations of responsible moral behavior exist in the nature of things, and it will not do to attempt to escape or transcend them by blinding ourselves to the most profound truths about ourselves and our social predicament.

But it is precisely here where, for Christians, the true liberating power of the gospel breaks in. We are freed and energized to act without assurance of success or even of the rightness of the causes in which we enlist. Luther advised us to sin boldly, a counsel of existential engagement and moral humility for which T.S. Eliot provided a gracious benediction: "For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

Running from the Pods

("You're next!" *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*)

Each morning when we tell our dreams,
I lie and listen to Derek's
Soprano stories, how this week
His friends' red souls have been stolen
By mysterious rays, and how,
Like Miles Bennell running from pods,
He finds no one who believes him.

I remind him of these breakfasts,
My hearing each warning he has.
"But I never tell all of it,"
He says, and I am left to name
His horror, the shame of being
The last of his species on Earth,
Stupidly selecting the door
To the tiger. Our bowls are filled
With flakes; I dream of telling him
I want to splice into his nerves,
Overhear each thought and advise
Him in some subliminal way.

Which is what he sees I think, devouring
The cereal he knows my son to love.

Gary Fincke

Television

Visualizing Rock Music

The Weird and Disquieting World of MTV

James Combs

One of the major ways in which we identify who we are and what we want to be is the music we listen to.

America is a nation beset by a wide variety of cultural conflicts—ethnic, regional, religious, and so on. These conflicts are supplemented, and often reflected in, the variety of "taste cultures" around the land. A region, for example, is in many ways a region of the mind, consisting of people who identify with that region (the South, for instance) and who demonstrate that identification through play, through their selection of taste. The "urban cowboy" culture identifies the players at Gilley's in Houston or practically anyplace in the country as part of an entire ethos and way of life. The message that we are hard-hat, redneck, rough and ready, hard-drinking, macho, anti-intellectual, hawkish, etc. is communicated by those who are a part of that culture in a hundred different ways.

One of the major ways is through music. If it is the case that we are what we play, telling ourselves and others thereby who we are and what we want to be, then a major clue to that identity is the music we listen to. Country and Western music is the constant accompaniment of the urban cowboy, the forensic articulation of a philosophy of life, a guide to behavior, and an indicator of subtle changes in style. A cynic once remarked that no one believes what he reads in the Bible any more, but no one doubts the truth of the lyrics of popular music. If there is anything to that at all, then it behooves us to understand the power of popular music.

There is, of course, nothing new about popular music. Its roots can be traced to the troubadour and folk traditions, with songs about some of the more persistent popular themes of today—unrequited or unfulfilled love, early death and separation, the sadness of loneliness. We should also remind ourselves that popular music has always had a healthy strain of vulgarity in it and has always been controversial. Plato, after all, was much concerned with youth listening to the "right kind" of music. So too have been the modern guardians of popular morality as music has developed in this century. One can find in their times alarums about the corrupting dangers to youth of ragtime, jazz, swing, boogie woogie, bebop, and rock and roll.

Despite such warnings, the appeal and availability of popular music gets more pervasive all the time. Consider just one startling fact: the rock business is now at least a three billion dollar a year industry, one of the major exports of American trade, the biggest entertainment industry in American history, far bigger than professional athletics, bigger than the movies ever were even in their heyday, and still growing. Muddy Waters did indeed set in motion a rolling stone.

Anyone over forty can recall the controversy and excitement that this new popular force caused when rock emerged on the scene in the Fifties. It was a Dionysian antidote to the repressive normalcy of that time, to be sure, but also a reaction by the "kids" against the insipid state of popular music after World War II. The postwar kids had money, a long period of adolescence, considerable leisure time, and their own culture; thus they wanted their own music to celebrate, and legitimate, their own interests, which were, in order of importance, sex, sex, and sex. From the start, rock and roll was threatening to social authorities because they sensed what it was about, and what it might "lead to." Whether it did, or simply articulated what was already being felt, is impossible to know. But Chuck Berry was right: rock and roll was here to stay, and people still love that rock and roll music, any old way you choose it.

And how we have ever chosen it! The rock "revolution," like any social movement, became institutionalized (but with new undercurrents bringing continuing changes), complete with a power elite, pantheon of gods, founding fathers (a pilgrimage to Graceland and Elvis' grave is good for the soul, like going to the Lincoln Memorial or Mount Vernon), arbiters of taste (*Rolling Stone* magazine), management and marketing techniques—the whole gamut of things we associate with a self-contained world of institutions, power, wealth, and creativity.

Rock is now over thirty years old, and it has a history; it is no longer followed only by the young, but also by middle-aged people (like me) who were raised on it, are used to it, expect it. (On the other hand, performances by aging groups such as the Rolling Stones or the Who do seem slightly ludicrous.) Rock has been around long enough that we can recall nostalgically songs and groups from the past, and remember how particular songs were there in key moments in our lives. The nostalgic power of the "oldies but goodies" explains the success of radio stations that play nothing else (like Chicago's WFYR) and of movies such as *American Graffiti* and *Diner.*

As rock developed, however, it

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The videos of MTV are for many of us a first real insight into how rock music looks when translated into visual form in the mini-dramas that accompany each song.

became clear that what it communicated was a good bit more than moon-and-June bubble gum. The political and idealistic messages of Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and other products of the Sixties demonstrated that rock could combine commercial and socially-conscious motives. In death Lennon was given almost Gandhian status, a prophet of peace and justice available through rock channels to a lot more people than any previous one.

But other events and trends associated with the rock world troubled people who thought about the effects of such a powerful means of expression. Woodstock Nation was either a promise or a threat, depending on your point of view. For the latter, it outraged bourgeois morality and much more. (For James Watt, even the Beach Boys threatened to bring together the "wrong kind" of people at the Washington monument; he clearly hasn't been to a punk concert lately, or he'd want to call out the Marines.) In the disillusionment of the Seventies, punk and New Wave became deliberately outrageous, offering fascistic or nihilistic messages without any of the idealism of the previous decade. Where rock goes from here it is difficult to say; but surely it will go somewhere other than decadence. Or does it just reflect where Western society is during its decline and fall? Perhaps someday punk rock will be studied in the same way historians of Rome study the orgy.

Now many readers may not keep up with the rock world in enough detail to know what's happening in it, or the importance it has for young people. And indeed, most teenagers probably vary considerably in their attention to it. But there is now a way to gain an unprecedented access to the rock world, and indeed to experience a new art form. This is through a cable channel called Music Television (MTV).

MTV is the result of recent video innovations, through which rock albums can be put on videocassette and sold (kids in rich suburbs regularly lay out $50-$80 for video albums). MTV programs a mix of the visual skits the groups do to the song, including the most recent hits, some promising groups, some of the established groups in action, interspersed with rock news, interviews, and of course commercials. MTV has expanded from two million viewers when it first went on the air in September, 1981, to an anticipated eight million at the end of this year; industry analysts estimate that record store sales of records and tapes of songs increase from 15 to 20 per cent after being shown on MTV. So the parent satellite company that produces MTV (owned by Warner Amex) is happy: it can demand, and get, top dollar for advertising time on MTV, mostly for youth-oriented products.

The technology of it all is amazing, but for viewers—rock fans or not—what is really fascinating is the aesthetics of the video productions on MTV. Rock groups hire proven producers from Hollywood and Madison Avenue to produce video albums, and they pay them lavish fees. (Some of the bigger artists are rumored to pay out $100,000 to $150,000 for video albums, but given the stakes in the Top 40, it is often worth it.) MTV is hosted by a group of diverse young people whose function, one suspects, is simply to be non-threatening to parents and thereby make it seem OK for the kids to watch MTV. Since MTV has defined its audience as largely teenage (14 to 24), maintaining parental approval is important. The videos they play never depict overt sexual acts, drugtaking, or splatter violence. Too, they avoid the supermacho "heavy metal" rock, and the really sicko punk (e.g., glorification of S & M).

But even within those constraints, what you do get to see is astonishing. The videos of MTV are for many of us a first real insight into how rock music looks when translated into visual form in the mini-dramas that accompany each song. That is, what is the popular aesthetic vision that rock can be given? Remember that MTV differs from the rock movie, the rock concert, and obviously the rock record. For television has the power of creating its own unique and intimate form of visualization, and as far as rock is concerned, that is what MTV is pioneering. What we are seeing here is the development of a new popular art form, one targeted at a "narrowcast" audience, using the aesthetic and technical resources of television to visualize rock. This means that the producers and artists have to translate the "perspective" of rock into mood and plot, image and idea, scene and act, giving audiences a 24-hour a day visual look at what rock says, and what rock means.

The world of MTV is international (the group Men at Work, for example, is from Australia, and the British presence is overwhelming). One formula for the video mini-dramas involves a straightforward presentation by the band or artist, although sometimes these are filmed in concert, thus becoming much more exciting and electric (the J. Geils Band has one performance with endless girls leaping on stage to hug and kiss the bandsmen). More often, the song is interspersed with the accompanying drama, casting the lead singer in a tale of love, lust, loss, or whatever. These tales will range from the funny to the deeply serious. Many of the punk/new wave types seem to be having a great old time, doing traditional love lyrics purely for laughs. On the other hand, more serious groups (such as Pink Floyd) make earnest statements about war and other important contemporary problems. One of the most celebrated—and

If the images presented on MTV are accurate, rock sees the world as surreal, absurd, and insane.

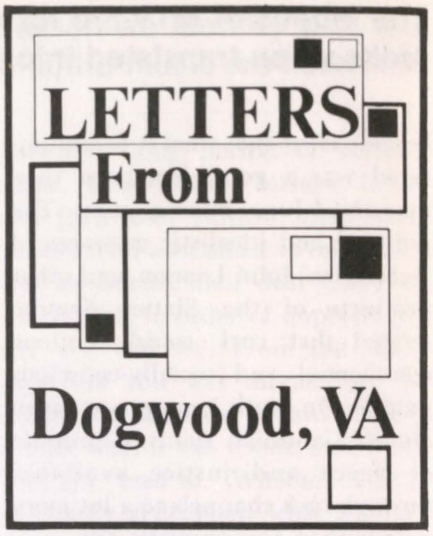
smartly done—of these is Billy Joel's "Allentown," all about the promise and decay of a steel town with high unemployment and closed factories. There are extraordinarily few black groups on MTV, which may indicate the channel's sensitivity to the white suburban audience that makes up the great bulk of its viewers. The notable exception is Michael Jackson, who strikes your columnist as the most exciting single rock performer since Janis Joplin. All in all, watching MTV is absorbing to the point of being hypnotic.

A new popular art form often has the virtue of freshness and experimentation at its inception (such as TV comedy in the early Fifties). MTV may therefore offer us new images of what rock means—its appeal, its historical significance, its aesthetic perspective. If you look at MTV long and critically, you may well come to agree with me: rock sees the world as surreal, absurd, and insane. The many startling images one encounters daily on MTV skits alone give that impression: demonic, witch-like women in grotesque makeup and outfits; surreal and unnatural landscapes; fantastic settings which change and disintegrate; change in the speed and direction of time; Kafkaesque buildings and labyrinths; stark and forbidding urban settings; the blurring of what is real and what is fantastic, of what is actually happening and what is subconsciously conjured.

Many of the video dramas offer grim visions of modern urban life—loneliness, the useless pursuit of pleasure, mean and drab streets, the claustrophobic confines of apartments and cars, the utter hopelessness of it all. Even when the drama is played for laughs, there is a cynical undertone to it, a disbelief that the game of love is really worth the candle. (Here we are relying more on the visuals than on the lyrics, but the latter convey as often as not much of the same worldview.) There is even a touch of the satanic, as the evangelicals have noted with alarm; but that does not seem to me an attempt to undermine Christian values or glorify Satan. Rather these rock depictions see the world as a demonic place, and the satanic imagery is meant simply to convey that. What else could you call a place in which love is absurd and pointless, life is grotesque and ugly, and the world is discontinuous and disintegrating?

Perhaps this judgment is too harsh; more systematic inquiry into this new popular art form no doubt needs to be done. Yet the dark and savage tones of much of the visualized music on MTV cannot be ignored for their pervasiveness and significance. What do these images tell us? Such an interpretation requires the skills of the art historian more than the social scientist. But even the graduate of Art Appreciation recalls that the various "modernisms" in art, literature, and philosophy—surrealism, dadaism, expressionism, existentialism, and the theater of the absurd—all indicated a crisis in the Western consciousness, a new disbelief in rational order, progress, and the integrity of reality. Both politics and physics conspired to demonstrate to the artist that the world was insane, random, and indeterminate.

Like the theater of the absurd, the minidramas of MTV are essentially farce, mocking a ridiculous and improbable world by acting as ludicrous and laughably inept as it. This is not to place the producers of rock TV on a par with Joyce, Beckett, and Ionesco, but they do sense and appeal to the same impulse, an impulse that must strike some responsive chord in the consciousness of MTV's youthful audience. Perhaps they—the video artists of MTV and their young audience—sense something about the state and direction of the world that the rest of us haven't yet caught on to.



On Stemming Tides of Educational Mediocrity

Charles Vandersee

Dear Editor,

Between you and me, I'm puzzled by one of the big domestic issues of the year. It arose last spring—the condition of the public schools—when the National Commission reported a "rising tide of mediocrity."

Possibly sea imagery here in Dogwood does not have quite the force it might in Santa Barbara. Or else I have been inundated all my life, never having suspected, really, that American schools had been so great in some era within memory. The only thing I am reasonably certain of is a rising tide, within my bosom, of skepticism regarding what the "experts" say. It may have to do with formative years in the Midwest, a thousand miles from one seacoast (home of the experts) and two thousand miles from the other (where the think tanks are). You not only get used to doing without, you sometimes accidentally thrive.

The experts say, for example, that we are going to have to pay teachers more, if we want to turn the tide. In the Dogwood paper not long ago appeared our local salary scale. In

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Charles Vandersee *has returned to Dogwood from England, Scotland, Wales, Minnesota, and Iowa.*

Everyone at Dogwood High School knows who the good teachers are. It is not a mystery, and you do not need professional instruments to measure this quality.

the county you start at $11,300 and after 12 years get $20,293. In the city things are better: start at $13,328 and in 26 years (when your 1.8 children are in college) you get $23,115.

For even a modest surge of bright people into the schools I think the starting salary will have to be at least half again as high ($16,000 to $19,000, let's say), with no ceiling on eventual salary. But I doubt that school districts and taxpayers are going to come up with that influx of money. In other words, the expert talk about money as one main solution is pretty much just talk.

A second issue, in Dogwood at least. The teachers' association has said much lately about the need to recognize teaching as a "profession," so that teachers get the income and respect they deserve. Intuitively, though (and from years as pupil, student, and university teacher), I'm skeptical as to whether teaching, at any level, is a profession. I think the public is skeptical too. When I think of professionals, I think of my very capable dentist, of a tax accountant alert to new legislation, of the late George Balanchine and others who have mastered an art well enough to be its innovators, of scientists in outer space functioning with deceptive ease. A teacher is not inferior to these; the teacher, however, is mainly an intelligent inculcator, not one of these perfect performers. The need in America is to say that we value intelligent inculcation, not to argue that the process must be "professionalized."

Then the question of merit pay for the "master teacher." The experts appear to be united against it, although I notice a change underway. They say you cannot "measure" merit. If you try, you will damage the morale of the whole teaching staff. If you damage morale, pupils will suffer.

On this matter I think of a teacher here in Dogwood, who told me last spring, with no prompting on my part, and indeed before the tide struck, that everyone at Dogwood High School knows who the good teachers are. It is not a mystery, and you do not need the instruments of professionals to measure this quality. People know. People are not dumb. "People" are the teachers themselves and the pupils. They can name names, and give reasons. I think Mrs. C. is right, and the reason is that the same knowledge arises wherever two or three are gathered together. I know who the truly outstanding persons are in my department at the university.

Do they deserve, then, more money? If they got more money, could the department bear the rising tide of anger, envy, and frustration from their colleagues? Well, I do think that in a good university "merit pay" is already in operation, successfully. Grants, awards, fellowships, invitations to meetings, offers by other universities—these are the longstanding measures of merit, and they become "pay" when the individual uses them to negotiate with his home institution for salary, perks, teaching load, and so forth. It is a convention of university life, and *because the measuring is done mainly by their peers,* it creates toward professors only a modest tide, if any, of resentment. Some comparable tradition conceivably could arise in the schools.

My friend Mrs. C. is part of my peculiar stance on these matters. Last spring she and I and a member of our School of Education faculty attended a conference in Atlanta, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. It was on "Improving High School Teaching in the Humanities," and we listened attentively to the other 22 teams, constituted much like ours.

This one conference did not make me informed, much less an expert. The only merit to my new and minuscule insight—Alexander Pope's dangerous "little learning"—is that I seem to be asking new questions. In fact, I am now ready to list a few issues that I would like to hear discussed, and I will lead up to them (nine in number) by citing once again Mrs. C. Her quiet convictions were seconded, reinforced, substantiated, and (I think) not at all contradicted by members of the conference.

She has taught several years at Dogwood High School, and she contends that three problems, besides salary, coalesce to cause much of the malaise in the schools today:

1. Teachers are overworked.
2. Teachers have no future to look forward to.
3. Teachers are afraid—of administrators, of parents, of bright kids, of each other, of change, of incursions by others into their classrooms, their private turf.

Brief amplification:

1. Teachers typically have five classes a day, every day, besides preparation and grading. There is a psychic strain in being "on stage" five hours a day, trying simultaneously to insure discipline, to stimulate interest, to reach children both *en masse* and individually. Then come hours of individual help, recommendations to write, activities to supervise, parents to contact. It is, even for the person who thrives on human contact and knows that gratitude will come only in trickles, not tides, a strenuous long day's journey into night.

2. Within this dark regimen there is, and will be, no relief, no precious growth, ever. Not in summer, because you have to take more courses or get temporary work to supplement your income. Not next year, because you will probably teach the same courses at the same school. Not ten years or twenty years from now, unless you go into administration, because there are no sabbaticals, no fellowships for advanced study, no promotions that will reduce your teaching load, no escape

One major problem: there is a type of person frequent in American public school teaching who is herself, himself, the perpetual adolescent or troubled child.

from perpetual childhood or adolescence around you all day in the classroom and the corridors. As much as low pay, *the destroyer of morale is this absence of a future.*

3. There is a type of person frequent in American public school teaching who is herself, himself, the perpetual adolescent or troubled child. Such a teacher can't relax, sees everyone else as competitor and enemy, fears and hates authority but has not achieved a personal firm sense of purpose and autonomy, resents achievement in others instead of learning to applaud and emulate. Though perhaps decently trained, this teacher is often badly educated, and knows it, is fearful of being exposed, is ill at ease with real reading and real thinking, is forced therefore to lead a life of bluff and evasion, which fools almost no one.

I keep charging Mrs. C. with the grossest stereotyping, but she responds, and others have told me, that the lineaments are accurate. (As I should know, they tell me; how many paragons—how many functioning adults—can a school district possess when in the U.S. the average salary after 12 years is $17,000?)

We have, apparently, structural problems in the schools and we have a human problem. The two kinds of problems are related, and there are surely additional serious problems, and nuances to the ones mentioned, that I have no inkling of.

The one thing I can offer is the truism that ignorance (my own ignorance) breeds antinomianism. I am a citizen willing, that is, to go against expert authority and received doctrine, and listen for a time to the discussion of intuitive notions. These notions, if at all valid, would require policy changes, political acumen, and some rethinking of what we mean by "the school system." Here they are, directed mainly to grades 7-12, and constituting a package rather than a list of options:

1. Hire as the local school superintendent a person outside the educational establishment: a well-respected citizen with breadth of vision, power of persuasion, and ability to withstand tides of controversy. Ask him to take a four-year leave of absence from his present position.

2. As openings appear, hire no more than one-half the teaching staff fulltime; for the rest of the teaching (perhaps especially in science, math, and business subjects), ask local firms, offices, colleges, and industries to release able people for one course each. Use also the skilled but temporarily unemployed, or underemployed, of all ages, and use mothers and fathers who don't want fulltime jobs. Ask them all to bring the "real world" with them—to emphasize mastery and achievement, apprenticeship, rather than hermetic exercises.

3. Do away with licensing and credentialing, and make hiring and retention of the fulltime staff strictly a matter of prior academic achievement, good judgment by the superintendent and citizenry, and present vitality and success.

4. Make tenure tougher, a matter of six or seven years' success at least, with no aura of the automatic about it. If you can't fire the adolescents on your staff, don't retain any new ones.

5. Energetically develop a system of locally-funded study leaves and sabbaticals by seeking gifts from banks, industries, small-fry philanthropists, and graduates susceptible to nostalgia. Then offer one-fourth of the fulltime staff each year a one-course reduction (with full pay), with accumulation possible for an eventual full semester off.

6. Supplement the local system with a statewide system of sabbaticals granted on a competitive basis, for past excellent performance and for a specific project of study or work judged worthy.

7. Energetically glean the local community for people to help with grading daily writing and to work intensively and individually (on a volunteer basis, as a public service) with pupils who need writing help and reading help.

8. Create and promote a system of noncredit courses, both refresher and topical, in all fields, oriented toward the public generally, perhaps especially senior citizens. These to be a standard part of school offerings, so that each fulltime teacher teaches adults at least one period a day. Adults taking such courses can be valuable in later helping evaluate teachers.

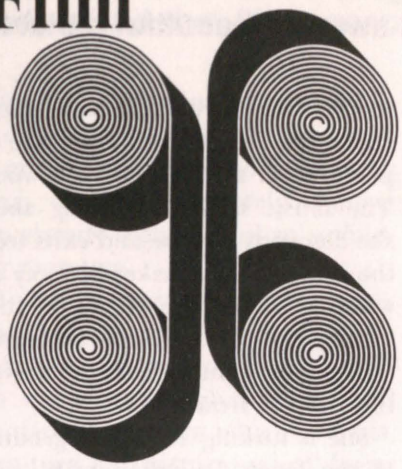
9. Increase salaries by the cutback in fulltime employees, but also work on the salary question by gradually putting fulltime faculty on an 11-month basis instead of nine or ten. Forbid moonlighting (though consulting would be OK), and require of all fulltime teachers participation in a summer seminar during one of their salaried months. The purpose of the seminar is to combat fears of their own ignorance and of each other by getting into a lot of reading, writing, and general collegiality within and across disciplines. The seminars might be conducted by teachers themselves, but by teachers from other systems and states, enabling some travel and occupational refreshment currently lacking.

Some of these notions are in the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Some of them are probably being talked about and even acted upon in more places than I realize. Even so, I suppose, nationwide, that antinomianism will produce more than a small wave of apprehension. Within these notions a lot of oxen are being gored. But if we have to choose between two tides, blood or mediocrity, the latter I should think is the more intolerably viscous.

From Dogwood, yours faithfully,

C.V.

Film



Movies have often made fun of opera, but in recent years the two have been combined most effectively.

Opera Nights At the Movies

Richard Maxwell

Traditionally movies make fun of operas. The fun may be anarchic, as when the Marx Brothers in *A Night at the Opera* run ludicrous backdrops up and down during a performance of *Il Trovatore,* or satirical almost to the point of libel, as in *Citizen Kane*'s caricature of Marion Davies' singing career. All the more striking that in the last few years opera and film have been so effectively combined. From France we have a modish thriller, *Diva,* which not only exalts the performance of an opera aria but is structured around that performance and its recording. From the tangles of international production we have two excellent adaptations, Losey's *Don Giovanni* and Zeffirelli's *La Traviata,* both superior to previous efforts in this vein. If we pause a few paragraphs with *Diva,* we will see that it tells us a great deal about the other works—particularly about their success in uniting two demanding art forms.

Diva is a sort of cinematic three-ring circus. Jules, a Parisian messenger boy, worships a beautiful black American soprano who refuses to have any of her performances taped. Jules tapes one secretly. Soon two Taiwanese record pirates are after him. They are not alone in their pursuit. Though Jules doesn't know it, he is also carrying around a taped confession which could crack a worldwide drugs-and-prostitution ring. Jules is saved from his various pursuers by a cool operator named Gorodish, who along with Alba, his fourteen-year-old Vietnamese girlfriend (she's an expert thief and models in the nude), hustles the boy off to an unearthly Magritte-style lighthouse, then faces down racketeers and record pirates simultaneously, making a fortune in the process through intricate blackmail techniques. Jules, meanwhile, returns to Paris for one last showdown with his enemies and a final meeting with his diva.

Diva's silly plot—concocted originally by a Swiss novelist who has written a series of thrillers about Gorodish—starts more hares than it can follow. The movie is most nearly satisfactory when it focuses on Jules' worship of the soprano (played by singer Cynthia Hawkins). The camera, as well as the accompanying soundtrack, makes us understand why he adores her. She has great dramatic presence. She sings her aria—a languishing, melodramatic swansong from "La Wally" —and we swoon right along with Jules, even while we share the secret of the taping. This scene is vital, first because it shows genuine love for the music, second because it contains a latent paradox which *Diva* gradually unfolds. Hawkins plays a character who stakes her artistic integrity on not being recorded. The film, however, doubles Jules' theft, recording the diva's image right along with her voice. Who do we believe, the singer in the story who rejects mechanical reproduction or the singer who cooperated with the moviemakers?

The film takes care to set the diva's motives against Jules'. Art, she affirms, cannot be possessed; it must be experienced, then relinquished. She adds that to be recorded is for her a form of rape, of illicit possession. Jules, by contrast, would never think of using the tape to harass the diva; he would never, for example, put it on the market. His economic disinterestedness looks good when we witness the actions of ruthless record pirates. Jules remains a dreamy, somewhat naive aesthete, and even if he's gotten art and sex mixed up—a condition for which the film supplies much evidence—we stand with him as much as with the diva.

Our feelings are held in a delicately-shifting balance, inclining a little this way and then a little that. The film moves towards its resolution by distinguishing among many kinds of possession: not just Jules' aesthetic desire for the tape as opposed to the record pirates' financial desire for it, but recording of images versus recording of sounds, recording of still images versus recording of moving ones, recording of music versus recording of the spoken word, and involuntary versus voluntary recording. So many varieties of mechanical reproduction go on display that we end up with only one apparent standard by which to judge them. We evaluate them from the perspective offered by the film's own synthesis of recordings.

This reordering is best accomplished at the end, when Jules manages to return the illicit tape. In the movie's concluding scene, the soprano stands on the stage where the story began while he plays back the aria from "La Wally." She comments, "But I've never heard myself before." No longer a piracy, Jules' tape opens up a new perception of artifice and its uses. We see the diva herself singing. Place, person, and voice meet once again, but curiously dissociated, as though that dissociation were necessary for anyone—her or us—to see and hear reflec-

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Diva's images are composed as if they were paintings to be savored. We would surfeit on this diet, but the film habitually throws away its beautiful pictures.

tively. The moment seems to be an analysis, a breaking down into parts; at the same time, it recalls one synthesis, the filmed aria, and perhaps creates another, for it reconciles Cynthia Hawkins with the character she has played. When the character changes her mind about the value of recordings, she and Hawkins become one singer, to whom we listen without being put in Jules' equivocal position.

The film suggests one further perspective. *Diva*'s images are exquisite, perfect . . . every one of them. They are invariably composed and lit as though they were paintings to be savored individually. We would surfeit on this diet, but the movie has a habit of *throwing away* its beautiful pictures. There are too many to be retained or appreciated. Some are irrelevant. Even when they aren't irrelevant, it is the nature of cinema that the projector just keeps turning. The diva, in other words, had a good point when she suggested that art must be relinquished, that it cannot be possessed. This is true especially of arts that exist in a temporal succession, like movies and music. The difference between a movie mechanically reproduced and a live performance of an aria is not that the aria magically, mystically dissolves whereas the movie can be hoarded. Both are fleeting, only the movie's fleetingness can be re-experienced. If we finally identify Hawkins with her character, we do so in part because we understand that film has it both ways.

Diva does quite a bit of aesthetic thinking without straining too hard. The same can be said for the recent *Giovanni* and *Traviata.* Rolf Liebermann, who directs the Paris Opera and who started the *Giovanni* project on its way, has commented: "I no longer believe in operas on film. I do still believe in films of opera." Losey's *Giovanni* and Zeffirelli's *Traviata* are both films of opera: both use the resources of cinema to re-create and redefine what happens in a live production of an opera—or for that matter, on a phonograph record of it. Most experienced operagoers will react to this accomplishment with the same kind of doubletake as the viewer who sees the diva hear herself. Once again mechanical reproduction and actual performance intertwine in a complex manner, producing an elusive but powerful experience.

Before attempting any closer evaluation, I will look at a single scene from each film. My description will not be as full as I could wish. Where two forms, film and opera, are so gracefully made to reconfirm and reinforce each other, only a shot by shot and a corresponding bar by bar analysis would suffice. My more modest aim is to remind the viewer and hearer of a particular experience, or else to prepare him for it.

The third number in *Giovanni* is a trio sung by the Don, his servant Leporello, and Donna Elvira, whom he has seduced. Donna Elvira announces that she is looking for the monster who has deceived her and would tear out his heart could she find him. The Don and Leporello accost her without knowing who she is; she recognizes them before they recognize her. Like the work from which it comes, this scene contains both serious and absurd elements. The absurdity of the situation is evident, with the Don thinking he is about to add a new conquest to his list, but the severe passion of Donna Elvira's complaint prevents the scene from having a comic impact only.

The score that I consult tells me that Donna Elvira should sing her part "facing the auditorium through the entire scene." The Don and Leporello presumably sneak up behind her. This is no doubt the sensible placement of actors if one is working with a proscenium stage; Losey deploys his forces differently. During an orchestral introduction to the aria, a veiled Elvira stands sideways to the camera. She is perched on a little rise in a wood. The music begins. Turning about she descends the rise and exits from the wood. As she makes her way towards daylight, she begins to sing. Where can she find the barbarous traitor who seduced her; the answer lies right in front of her.

She is lurking about the grounds of the Don's Palladian villa, seen perhaps a hundred yards away. She wanders over the lawn, closer and closer to the villa. The camera now looks on the scene from a relatively high angle; we notice a road, paralleling the grounds of the villa and—hemmed on one side by houses, on the other by an embankment—running up to meet it. Simultaneously, the veiled lady's complaint gathers in force. Up the road come the Don and his servant; they begin to stalk Elvira, speculating meantime on her identity. From the side, from above, finally from in front of Elvira, we too seek a look at her face. The wind blows her veil against her distinctive, high-boned features, which prove to be those of Kiri Te Kanawa. The three singers finally meet at the steps of the villa, where Donna Elvira unveils herself and the Don must hastily escape inside.

The opening section of *La Traviata* (immediately after the overture) is set in the splendid home of Violetta Valery, a courtesan. A party is in progress: one group of guests greets another group that has just arrived. The hostess invites everybody to eat, drink, and be merry. She is introduced to Alfredo Germont, who will soon become her lover and take her away from corrupt Parisian luxury. Alfredo declares his adoration while another of Violetta's following, the Baron Douphoul, mutters imprecations against him. The scene invokes a world and peoples it with four of the five characters who will act significant roles in the impending drama. From the first bars of the

Opera is highly stylized, but the directors of both *La Traviata* and *Don Giovanni* understand that film's concrete reality can still present the stylization of opera.

scene the predominant mood is festive, but lines of conflict are set up so quickly that the famous drinking song which immediately follows can already seem part of an unfolding narrative.

In Zeffirelli's version of this scene, the overture provides a visual as well as a musical lead-in. The camera wanders through a closed and shuttered mansion where objects, furniture, and pictures are all being packed by workmen. Among the workmen is a young man with an open, expressive face; he may remind us a little of Jules in *Diva.* He comes upon an oval portrait of Violetta. It bears the memorable features of Teresa Stratas (who herself resembles the original Lady of the Camellias, Dumas' Alphonsine Duplessis). The young man stares at the portrait, open-mouthed; the overture moves from a wavering adagio to an extraordinary theme in the violins associated throughout with the opera's heroine. Straying further, the boy peers into a huge bedroom where—lost in one corner—our heroine lies alone and dying. She sits up. She is hoping for someone's arrival. The boy recognizes her disappointment and withdraws.

Now it is Violetta whom the camera follows through the mansion; she surveys the wreck of her fortunes until two blasts of ascending notes in brass draw her attention to a strange metamorphosis. Just down the hall a crowd of elegantly-dressed people swarms under glowing yellow light. Violetta is delighted to recognize herself presiding over this party. The workman's intrusion on her and her intrusion (in memory) on a previous occasion have begun the action of the opera. For a few moments, the camera keeps the viewpoint of Violetta in the present; then it moves in on the scene in the past, presenting Alfredo, the Baron, and a host of cleverly differentiated party-goers. The lines of battle (the Baron shamed by Alfredo's ardent courtship of Violetta) are drawn among the gathering crowd in the entry hall; then the action moves to the dining room, where the drinking song will be sung over a magnificently-laid table.

Losey heightens our appreciation of Mozart's wit, Zeffirelli our vulnerability to Verdi's pathos. Allowing for such differences, the two treatments share a special strength. Opera is surely among the most stylized of the arts; film is often said to "confront concrete reality." Both directors understand that the concrete reality of film can be used to present the stylization of opera. They establish this point, above all, by relating sound to sight; by arranging for the singers' and the camera's movement through space to underline the structure of the music. Within the territory thus created, the opera can assume an immediacy unlike that of the stage.

The first step—movement through space—is exemplified rather obviously by the numbers just described. In Losey's version of the trio, he emphasizes the converging paths of indignant Elvira, predatory Giovanni, and diffident Leporello, so building up the crazy, comic logic of the meeting. Losey doesn't so much establish the meeting's plausibility as create a little system in which it must necessarily occur. Zeffirelli shows the same flair. He makes the connection intended by Verdi between the overture and the heroine; he elaborates from that connection a sentimental fiction of audiences which appropriately frames the subsequent action. Both films continue in this vein, sometimes with spectacular effectiveness. I will mention briefly two culminating moments, each of which could be the subject of an essay.

During the finale of *Giovanni*'s first act, avenging maskers arrive at the Don's villa by gondola; they proceed up the steps and under the great dome as though, in a series of apprehensive stages, invading a land of evil. The maskers' call for justice ("Protegga il giusto Cielo") is particularly effective: it is filmed from far above as the maskers pass through the rotunda. They seemed almost frightening when they landed; now they seem small and unprotected.

The corresponding culmination in *Traviata* occurs when, towards the end of the second act, Alfredo remonstrates with Violetta. He thinks she has betrayed him; she is honor-bound not to explain why she hasn't. According to the libretto, Alfredo calls to the guests; they flood into the room, whereupon he publicly insults her. Zeffirelli has Alfredo take a different sort of initiative. He *drags* Violetta from the small, intimate room in which they have been speaking down a hallway into a huge ballroom. He acts to force her humiliation on her, the camera following behind so that we participate viscerally in his anger, her shame. Zeffirelli has perfectly prepared the great finale of the act.

Movement through space has further implications. It emphasizes the physical presence of the singers and their existence within a particular milieu. Physical presence is less to be taken for granted than it seems. Operagoers do not get very close to opera singers—not unless they have miraculously good seats. This is unfortunate. Te Kanawa and Stratas—not to mention Ruggiero Raimondi as Don Giovanni or Placido Domingo as Alfredo—have the force, the charisma, associated with certain movie actors. Why not, then, put them in a movie where we can see them up close: where their acting, in fact, counts for more than it does from the balcony of the Met?

Aside from the presence of the singers, both films are remarkable for the intricate detail in which their milieux are worked out. There have been complaints on this score, espe-

Reassembled by the means of cinema, opera's "aura" takes on a new kind of life, a new kind of existence.

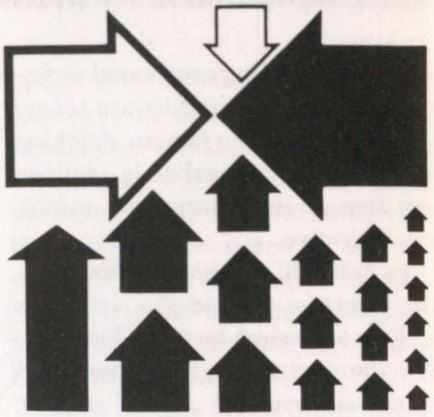
cially about *Giovanni.* Losey "can't bear to let his great singers merely sing." "Busy-ness is endemic." "Zerlina pursues Mazetto . . . through a veritable jungle of corn-cobs, strings of garlic, hanging hares, racks of fruit, and busy kitchen-hands." However, these complaints by Hermione Lee suggest a sensibility attuned to phonograph recordings, no more privileged a representation of opera than are films. The saturation of detail and social nuance achieved by both Losey and Zeffirelli presupposes another kind of viewer; one who enjoys connecting seeing with hearing, who finds that each activity can illuminate the other, and who might like to see films like these more than once. We learn to handle an overload through repeated viewings and hearings, something much more possible with film adaptations than with live stagings—something not possible at all with a record, where we can only hear. Each representation or realization demands its own aesthetic, its own standard of judgment.

In the mid-Thirties, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno had a quarrel about the effect of mechanical reproduction on art. Their dispute centered largely on film, which according to Benjamin would soon create a new kind of audience, capable of appreciating works critically instead of on a cultic, ritualistic basis. Adorno was skeptical. He understood that film could project the "aura" by which art had exerted its power in the past. Mechanical reproduction did not ensure critical thinking. Our filmed operas would have provided a tantalizing case for Benjamin and Adorno to argue about. They confirm Adorno's point, providing enough aura for any intoxicated operagoer. They also confirm Benjamin's point. Reassembled by the means of cinema, aura takes on a new kind of life, a new kind of existence in the minds of its audience.

We hardly have the vocabulary yet to talk about this phenomenon, which is nonetheless evident even in the most cultic of Thirties films (taking an example very close to *Traviata,* the Greta Garbo *Camille*). We can recur to *Diva,* where the spellbinding performance and its subsequent recording, exploitation, and analysis ultimately reconfirm the original magic—with a difference, however. The same difference is present in the adaptations by Losey and Zeffirelli. A work for the stage is recreated more freely (in space), more densely (in detail), more vividly (in the illusionary closeness of the singers). It remains the same work—yet it does not. We want to keep going to live performances, when we can find them; we want to keep hearing records. The double violation of film provides a third possibility.

Bibliographical note: I have benefited from several articles on the works discussed in this essay. For Diva, *see Pauline Kael's review in* The New Yorker, *April 19, 1983; for Losey's* Giovanni, *see Roland Gelatt,* "Don Giovanni: *Opera Into Film,"* American Film *(April 1979), including Rolf Liebermann's comments on opera, film, and "concrete reality"; for Hermione Lee's detractions, see* TLS, *October 3, 1980. Walter Benjamin's essay is translated in* Illuminations *(New York: Schocken Books, 1969), ed. by Hannah Arendt and trans. by Harry Zohn. The Benjamin-Adorno dispute is discussed in Richard Wolin,* Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption *(New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Losey's* Giovanni *and Zeffirelli's* Traviata *are dependent on pre-recorded music; the Mozart is conducted by Lorin Maazel, the Verdi by James Levine; both are available as records or tapes. The film of* Don Giovanni *was shown at Valparaiso University in fall of 1982, thanks to an appropriation from the Cultural Arts Committee of the University.*

The Nation



New Mexico and The United States

Gail McGrew Eifrig

New Mexico can be seen as an emblem of the essential truth in the motto which some classically educated founding father attached to the young republic: *e pluribus unum.* The paradox in the phrase gives it the memorable quality it ought to have. How can one thing result or derive from many? It is easy to see the "pluribus" in New Mexico; the population of this state is perhaps the least typically American you could find on the continent. A sociologist could more accurately describe the populace, but any careful onlooker will notice the salient facts.

The state is largely comprised of four ethnic groups. There are of course the Indians (who were here first, but are by no means united since they are several different nations themselves); then there are hispanos (who arrived with Coronado in about 1540, but really settled in to stay by 1590 when Onate set up a governmental center in Santa Fe); anglos (who drifted in throughout the nineteenth century, but arrived in great numbers after the last homestead act of 1916 allowed the range to be plowed into little farms, destroying both the range and thousands of would-be farmers, most of whom moved on to California to try oranges); and Mexicans (who have always and are

currently just crossing the border.) Many of the anglos are Texans, or more correctly, ex-Texans, and considering them a separate quantity is a distinguishing mark of the non-Texan anglo.

Each of these groups considers itself the real New Mexico population—every so often a governor is elected from each group, though to my knowledge there has never been an Indian one—and all of them unite only to scorn the several subgroups scattered throughout the state. These subgroups are interesting but definitely peripheral; ex-San Francisco gourmet cooks in Santa Fe, ex-Carmel art dealers in Taos, ex-Chicago physicists in Los Alamos, ex-Minneapolis air force pilots in Albuquerque.

Oddly enough, members of these groups are the primary contact that most of the rest of the country has with New Mexico. Touring the state you should never mention, if you want to be taken seriously, that you have seen an opera in Santa Fe, that you are visiting a cousin who works for the government at White Sands, that you have skied Angel Fire, or that you're on a sabbatical leave to study Indian dances at Las Cruces. The New Mexicans will smile benignly because they have you where they want you; another flatlander has succumbed to the travel section of some eastern newspaper. If you do these things, then like everybody else who does them, you will soon be leaving, and the natives can go back to their endless bickering about which group is the real New Mexico.

New Mexico has less rainfall, less ground water, less income, and more average altitude than any other state. Lots of the state looks poorer than America ought to look, and, in fact, when we told friends that we intended to live there for a year, we were asked if we'd need passports. For years the New Mexico legislature was bilingual, the only state in the union to be administered in Spanish and English.

For most midwesterners, the finishing touch in the list of details that sets New Mexico apart from the rest of the United States has to do with cattle. Lots of people raise cattle in the state. Most of them just run a few head, but there are big operations too. This means considerable involvement with the federal government, because all grazing is controlled by the Bureau of Land Management, which allots permits for the number of head an individual can run on the acreage he owns or leases. Generally, you must have fifty acres per head. Now do you believe that it's another world? The license plate says that it is the Land of Enchantment, and almost any experience of it may give you the feeling that you have indeed been bewitched into some mysterious country that does not contain Dubuque, Columbus, or Miami. New Mexico is other.

And yet there is no place more quintessentially American. Most of the tensions and impulses that shape American life everywhere are here too. The spirit of rugged individualism incorporates itself in the burly truckers at the Largo Cafe; they're eating green chili burgers but they're talking get-ahead enterprise like truckers anywhere. Their aggressive toughness is American, and so are their beer bellies and their expressions of hostility toward Jews. Their faults and their virtues are not New Mexican, but American.

The American ambition to look out for oneself here takes the form of the rifle in the back of the pickup, but the fellow who drives it may work for the US Forestry Service, or the Bureau of Land Management, or the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He may scorn the namby-pamby ways of the city dweller, but his paycheck comes from their taxes, and in this dilemma he typifies the American ambivalence about government and individual initiative. And since all of us appear to need the myth of the West, with its strong silent men riding off straight-backed into the distance, we are all affected by the contradiction in the reality. Can the Marlboro man really buy his outfit with a check from the feds?

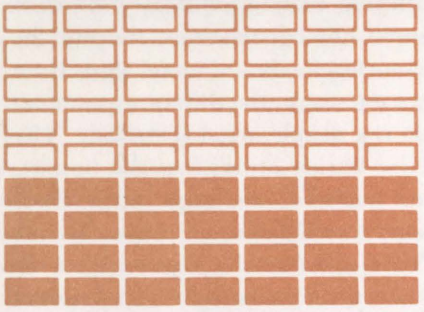
America still seems experimental, still appears to be working out the premise that you can take individuals from many different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds and make them one people without altering that individuality. Despite some homogenizations, despite the same fast foods and motel signs from coast to coast, the differences among us as a people are still striking. The New Yorker knows that the important United States stops at the Hudson; the Californian calls Denver "back east." In the Middle West we know what it means to call ourselves the heartland; we're indispensible. Yet we dare—as a nation—to say that we are one people. We try to administer, to govern ourselves as though this were not a mere fancy but hard reality. Face to face with the intractable otherness of just one state, that oneness seems impossible. And yet it does exist.

Somehow or other, even this outlandishly different population considers itself American, considers itself united to other states. Perhaps I could illustrate this, and get back to "e pluribus unum," with the guest list for the Fourth of July celebration at my parents' house. My parents were born from German and Irish ancestors in Ohio, and both raised in California. My sister's husband is a combination of Virginia gentlemen farmers and New York society. My husband's families are Germans, Illinois farmers and pastors. My children are Hoosiers, my sister's are Arizonans. We had with us some New Mexican residents from down the road. Lucille is a Baca—one of the Spanish explorers from the treks of 1590 was a Baca—and her husband Jim Hogan is Baltimore Irish, a stone mason who moved west years ago because he'd always wanted to own a ranch.

We all ate ham and potato salad and pickles and iced tea, we played baseball, we watched fireworks, and at the end of the day we sang the national anthem and said the pledge of allegiance: one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.

Oddly enough, we all felt that the words were true.

The Last Word



Says Who?

Dot Nuechterlein

"Look," said my friend, "you might as well be upfront about it. This is going to be a touchy situation, with lots of criticism. The best defense is a good offense, so face the facts and speak out before someone attacks you first."

Okay, here goes.

Following the long, proud tradition of such celebrated essayists as John Strietelmeier and O.P. Kretzmann, this is to be a continuing column. If you glance at this back page regularly, you will see my name alone for a whole year's worth.

I do not wish to get into a discussion of the traumas of trying to follow the likes of my onetime professor JS, let alone the legendary OPK. In my professional life I have just made a career shift in which I have succeeded still another nearly irreplaceable person, and if I let myself think for a minute about what I've let myself in for in double-whammyness the consequent stress might result in the remainder of this page staying empty. Which would further exacerbate the issue I do wish to pursue.

You may have noticed that the surname on this page is the same as the one on the masthead. So let's get all the smart comments about nepotism and family dynasties and all those other snickering cracks out of the way right off. Because you may think that this is a honey-and-pie situation for the individuals involved, but you are wrong. W-R-O-N-G. Based on recent experience, there is an enormous chance that we have trouble right around the bend.

Let me explain. It is true that the masthead fellow and I are related to one another, and that we share house, car, children, bills, and dentist. What we do not always share, however, are ideas.

This should be some source of comfort to the reader—you need not fear bombardment month by month from two "book ends" voices speaking one message. It is, though, a potential source of grief for yours truly. You see that catchy back-page title up there, "The Last Word"? Ha! The writer *never* has the last word: in the card game of publishing, editors always hold all the trumps.

Now fairminded ones—and the one in question is certainly that—do not balk at printing alternative viewpoints, for quality publications are always a tad unpredictable and diverse. No, the problem is not in getting your case heard; it is that at any time there may be a featured editorial on the same topic demolishing your pet points without allowing any rebuttal. He, you see, knows in advance what you will say in print, but no way can you outfox him. Advantage, editor.

Then there is the little matter of style. Any word, sentence, paragraph is subject to editorial rearrangement or elimination, "not to change the meaning; just to enhance the style/prose/length/whatever."

Oh, sure, a blockbuster novelist can threaten to go elsewhere if so much as a comma is touched; but what choice have those of us who do this sort of stuff as a hobby? Picking up your marbles and going home is to laugh.

Now you may think this is of little moment. After all, when one gets one's name in print, why fuss over every little word? Indeed, some don't care—the big idea people are happy to let someone else fiddle with details, so long as they can take final credit.

But others of us so labor over each phrase and nuance that we feel them issue forth as in the birth experience. I, for one example, happen to like the sound of many of my infinitives split; editors like to habitually display their stuffiness on that score. (NOTE: This is a test case; let us just see where that adverb shows up in print!) When an editor "cleans up the prose" it may in fact sound better to the reader; but to the writer it sounds like someone else wrote it, or it seems an assault on one's integrity and identity.

There is another problem. Creative types hit blocks from time to time. Term paper writers and book authors alike spend hours staring at blank paper between pretend-work bouts of sharpening many pencils and scrutinizing every fifth word in the thesaurus. When you hit one of those periods and your deadline was day before yesterday and the guy you owe copy to is watching every move you make, well, it tends to endanger marital stability along with coagulating whatever compositional juices remain.

To be fair, it can't be a picnic for him, either. Editors may be feared or vilified, but are rarely argued with. (We once spent a week battling over an article's sub-title.) It isn't easy choosing between the sacrifice of one's professional reputation versus one's vows to love and cherish. I understand that, really I do. Let's Keep This A Professional Relationship is a terrific motto, but . . .

I could go on, except for the strict word limit. Just remember, please, that if ever you read anything here that sounds ungrammatical or illogical or crazy, you know who to blame.